When the Riddler Met the Scarecrow

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When the Riddler Met the Scarecrow

by wanderingoverthewords

Summary

Edward Nygma makes a new acquaintance in Arkham Asylum.

Notes

Characters: Edward Nygma, Oswald Cobblepot, Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow; mentions of Batman, unnamed GCPD officers, various unnamed asylum patients and staff members, Oswald's mother, Harvey Dent, Joker.

Pairings: None.

Warnings: forced sedation; mentioned suicide, patient mistreatment, murder, assault, human experimentation.

Notes: How my versions of Edward and Jonathan first met. Like a lot of DC fanfic writers, I pick and choose what material I canonise for my characters, so expect some comic mentions. The rest is all headcanons.

A WanderVerse fic.

All material belongs to DC Comics (although my interpretations of the characters are used).

Chapter 1

There couldn't be a soul on earth who liked Arkham Asylum, not one. It was widely assumed that not even the family it was named after and created by had even liked it, considering the drama that had arisen with its creation. Crumbling relationships, troubling inmates, suicides abound amongst both the sane and insane; the place was filled to the brim with trouble and ill mental health - expected but not encouraged in an asylum - and one couldn't wait to see it fall to the ground in the future.

'One' was Edward Nygma.

A perfectly good death-trap having gone to waste, he was already angry enough with his loss of progress, entertainment and cash, but to have to go to Arkham Asylum as well was Edward's own personal day from Hell. He complained throughout the entirety of his arrest, ignored by Batman and officers but told to shut the hell up by the particularly brave asylum employee who had come and picked him up from the station. He'd only stopped his ranting once he'd reached Arkham itself, where guards were far more likely to beat him. He was already humiliated, he didn't need to add literal bruises to the metaphorical ones.

He was compliant but angry as he was led through the moving in process: checked for weapons (one knife and a pistol, both of which were taken away), given his overalls, led to the changing room to dress himself, ordered to hand over his suit, cane and hat and then handcuffed and delivered to his cell. He felt comfort in the fact that the cells were one-inmate-only; he wasn't in the mood for company, coherent or otherwise.

Edward allowed himself to stew for his first day in Arkham, keeping his head down and himself as quiet as he could (predictably, this lasted about five minutes, then he overheard someone telling an incorrect fact and had to open his gob). He knew his death-trap was likely to have been dismantled by now; Batman would've informed the GCPD on where they could find it, and they weren't going to allow it to stand while there was no one to watch over it. That only made him angrier - all that hard work, all that *planning, wasted* - and he narrowly avoided getting his nose broken *(again)* when he'd snapped at the wrong person.

He didn't even have room to be *angry* in Arkham, Christ help him. This truly was Hell on Earth.

Quite possibly Edward's least favourite room in the entire facility, however, was the mess hall, where the disturbed rats of this asylum gathered in clusters, where the general filth built up and made him want to vomit, where the food was only marginally more disgusting than the inmates and probably not even edible (didn't stop some of them trying, however).

Edward had been far too content to stay away from the place, but a few days' worth of absence from meal time made the guards come and collect him. His doctor had claimed there was concern for his health since he wasn't eating, but Edward knew they were more worried he was up to something, and he knew they wouldn't listen if he told them he was taking the chance to nap during everybody's absence (God knows, one couldn't even *sleep* in Arkham

Asylum, especially when one's neighbour enjoyed banging on the walls during the night. Edward was seeing to it that he'd have his revenge).

Disgruntled even further, Edward's entrance into the mess hall was slow on purpose, and he immediately looked at the other inmates with disdain.

All of them, filthy and solitary, even in their groups. They picked at their food, played with it, even talked to it in some cases.

Edward's nose wrinkled and he stuck out his tongue in an exaggerated gag, tilting his head away from the sight of them.

"You, there! Edward, isn't it?"

Edward's eyes sought out the source of the calling, landing upon a stocky man with slicked back, black hair and carrying a cane in one hand. His nose was set at an angle that made him instantly recognisable; the fact that he waddled just set his identity in stone.

The limp he had was caused by the fact his right foot was permanently set sideways and deformed thanks to a birth defect; the cane was evidently too small for him to use, but Edward wasn't surprised. Arkham didn't exactly do an amazing job of taking care of its patients, no matter what anybody said. Still, the man looked as though he was getting used to the cane and it didn't seem like the awkward hobbling was causing him much pain, so that was something.

To be honest, Edward was surprised to even see the Penguin in Arkham. From the research he'd done on his new…shall we say - colleague, he didn't seem to classify as insane. A bit greedy, a bit weird, but insane? No.

Then again, Edward didn't classify as insane, did he? The doctors had been spewing diagnoses at him since he got here - 'OCD' this and 'narcissism' that - and he could easily say they were all wrong. He wasn't *insane,* he wasn't *mentally ill,* he wasn't *deranged.* It was all a load of cobblers. They were just the petty-minded imbeciles he'd tried to get rid of, back when the Riddler had made a name for himself in the Zero Year. They didn't understand *genius* and so they slapped a label on it.

Edward set his hands behind his back and nodded once curtly as the Penguin reached him. He almost instinctively reached for his fedora to tip it politely, but had to remind himself that it was gone, taken away when he'd arrived. Edward's lip curled slightly in indignation at that, but he forced a smile that turned out rather thin.

"Indeed, it is. And *you* are - you don't have to remind me - Oswald Cobblepot." He extended a hand.

Oswald smiled a smile that showed a slither of white teeth as he held out his own hand, taking Edward's and shaking it heartily.

The two had met a month prior, when Edward had waltzed into the Iceberg Lounge like he owned the place, almost immediately drawing a crowd of mainly women, receiving laughter

for his witty comments and delighted chatter when they put his intelligence to the test. Why they had felt the need to, Edward hadn't understood at first; hadn't they all been present during the Zero Year? But then it hit him: he was the clapping seal at a zoo's animal show, he was the jumping whale at the water park; he was the crowd-pleaser. The more he showed his skills, the more people loved him.

Good. They *should've* loved him.

Oswald had gotten involved quickly enough, inviting himself to sit down opposite Edward in his booth and chatting animatedly to him. They talked business, they talked motives, they talked gimmicks; the Riddler and the Penguin had left their conversation feeling mutually satisfied. They'd met new players in the game, players who might be of use in the future. Above all else, however, they'd each had a chat with a gentleman who understood them on some level, and that was always refreshing to have in Gotham.

"Threw you in here too, did they, Edward?" Oswald asked, a slight joking tone to his voice.

"Of course. Tell a few riddles, build up a death-trap and suddenly, everybody thinks you're insane," Edward replied, cocking his head with a small smirk, despite his dislike of the diagnosis.

'Insane' - right!

As Oswald chuckled, Edward went on, raising an eyebrow, "I see you've gotten a ticket here too, though, Oswald. I was under the impression Blackgate was your decided house of punishment."

"Not this time, I'm afraid. After the conflicting opinions of four different psychiatrists, the court decided I may be a danger to myself and those around me -"

"Shocking."

"- and that there may be more to my bird brain than meets the eye, so they've sent me here, with the rest of the…mentally unfortunate."

Edward nodded.

It was generally agreed upon in Gotham's underworld that the Penguin wasn't insane, just overzealous, and his crimes were out of greed and pride, not insanity. Seemed as though the court had decided to take a chance with this one, put him to the real test. Only the 'mentally unfortunate' could survive Arkham; you'd have to be crazy to stay more than a day without begging for release or ending it all (Edward, of course, was on a whole other level than these morons, so this didn't apply to him). See how the Penguin fared, Edward was sure the jury had said, see how long it takes for him to cry to his mama.

Edward had looked Oswald up; crying to his mama was very likely. Just not in front of the press.

“They were wrong to do so, of course,” Oswald said, “and I have lawyers working on my early release as we speak. But never mind that, now. Let’s not talk of such nonsense as the court’s opinions of us, leaves a bad taste in my mouth.” Oswald waved a hand as he turned his back on Edward. “Come. Join me.”

With that, the Penguin started his wince-inducing walk away, making Edward frown lightly. Not the politest of invitations, it made Edward’s already spiked nerves poke at his belly, but he let it slide for now. He knew of Oswald’s power; it wouldn’t do him well in his rising career and status as a Gotham Rogue if he were to suddenly disappear. Oswald was more useful to him as an ally rather than an enemy.

With this in mind, Edward followed after him, keeping a decent pace in order to not overtake nor crash into him. Clearly, the cane Arkham had provided Oswald was not nearly as good at supporting him as it should’ve been; it seemed to slip out of his grasp every time he put his weight on it. Edward watched it as Oswald moved.

Oswald led Edward to a table in the back of the room, far away from the grown man whispering to himself about what the bunnies would do to him tonight and the girl who was using a fork to pick out the hairs from her scalp and all the rest of the lunatics they were forced to surround themselves with. The table was stained in four places, like ugly splotches on a half-arsed domino, and Edward wrinkled his nose at them.

Discreetly, he stole the napkins from the woman sitting behind the spot he’d chosen, who was too busy murmuring her secrets to her food to notice, and tried to wipe one spot away. When that didn’t work, the stain hard and crusty beneath Edward‘s scrubbing, he cringed, changed seats and laid a second napkin down on the bench. Using another two to cover the spots on the table where he planned to rest his elbows, Edward tucked the final napkin into his pocket for later, just in case.

Before he could sit, Oswald waved a hand at him and said, “Grab yourself some food, Edward, and meet me back here.”

Edward’s nose wrinkled at the very thought. He, instead, took his seat opposite the Penguin. “Please. Eat that slop? I’d rather *die.”*

Oswald chuckled and made himself comfortable on the other bench.

From there on out, it was just like at the Iceberg Lounge. They talked animatedly about anything they thought of, mainly of Gotham and who they predicted the Batman was. When that topic proved too tense and sore for them both, they talked instead about the people around them. The lesser-knowns, the ones who weren’t nearly as dangerous as them, the lower rungs of the power ladder.

Edward detested every one of them.

When the conversation faltered, Edward let his gaze roam over them all until that, too, faltered, and he was frozen in place.

There was a man sitting alone at the table next to theirs; Edward narrowed his eyes at him. He was tall and gangly and had a head of unruly ginger hair, shaggy and scruffy and tied back in a short ponytail. Clearly, he hadn't cared for his hair in a while, and Edward found this very telling of the man's character. His overalls were ill-fitting on his skinny body, too baggy but too short due to his height, and his pale skin looked like it had been stretched over a skeleton. Edward could see his wrist joints and cheekbones from where he sat; most women would kill for cheekbones like that. Amazingly, he was eating the asylum food - actually *eating it!* He didn't lift his gaze from his food the entire time Edward stared at him, which was apparently longer than what was appropriate, since he was interrupted by somebody clearing their throat.

Edward looked back to his dinnertime companion, only to find Oswald arching an eyebrow at him. "Taking an interest in our dear Scarecrow, are we, Edward?"

Edward narrowed his eyes again.

Scarecrow…A name he'd caught once or twice in the newspapers' recent headlines, but not someone he'd bothered to look up just yet nor had he bothered to read the articles. A genius like him had too much to do and too little time to do it.

Edward looked back to the man; he was still hunched over his tray, spooning out helpings of grey slop and popping it into his mouth like it was pudding.

A feeling nibbled at the back of his brain; Edward was sure of it: he knew that man. He knew him beyond their Rogue names.

"I know him…" Edward spoke aloud, voice coming out in a thoughtful murmur.

"I'd imagine so," Oswald replied, looking over at the man now too. "He's been dominating the headlines lately; they say it's a miracle he's finally been caught." He barked out a laugh and shook his head. "Fear-mongering, is what it is - he isn't half as dangerous as they say. Well - not on his own. Not without…" He trailed off, clearing his throat to apply a metaphorical period to that sentence, then he went on, "But then…fear is the Scarecrow's specialty. He probably feasted upon it."

Edward stared. He needed to see the face properly, hear the voice, get a name beyond 'Scarecrow'. Then he would know for sure…

"Would you like me to introduce you?"

It was as if Oswald had read his mind.

Edward looked back to his companion. He thought about it, then nodded once slowly.

Oswald collected his cane and rose from his chair, cocking his head in a gesture for Edward to follow him as he stepped away from their table, limping toward the one Scarecrow sat at.

Edward did as he was instructed, rising quickly from his seat, stopping only to peel off the napkin that had stuck itself to his elbow, then he was following after Oswald closely.

The man still didn't stop eating as they approached his table, standing by the bench opposite to the one he was sitting on. He did, however, look up from his meal, eyes locking onto them without him raising his head, staring from behind his circular glasses. He was frowning deeply now; either he didn't trust them or he really hated being interrupted in his eating.

Considering his body weight, which indicated he didn't eat very much at all, Edward would say the former.

"Greetings," Oswald said with an easy smirk, cocking his head at the man, as if amused by his distrust. "I hope we aren't interrupting anything, Dr. Crane."

Just like that, something clicked in Edward's mind.

His eyes widened at the man; within his little mind palace, files of memories were sorting themselves, opening and closing, photos of faces held up to this one, until one made a match. In Edward's mind's eye, the scar running vertically through the left side of the man's lips disappeared, his hair shortened until it was cropped and lightly spiked, the orange Arkham overalls were replaced with a lab coat, shirt and tie and a nametag that read 'Dr. Crane'.

Edward *did* know him.

"Jus' my dinner," came the disgruntled reply and Edward faltered, then smirked in amusement. Crane had a Southern accent, reigning from Georgia, of all places.

He hadn't sounded like that when Edward had last seen him.

"What's this about, Cobblepot?" Crane asked, now eyeing Edward up and down in suspicion. If Crane recognised him, he didn't show it, simply chewing on his Arkham-made paste.

Oswald cleared his throat, then took a step to the side to let Edward have more space as the shorter male gestured to him with one wave of the arm. "Dr. Crane, this is Edward Nygma, also known as the Riddler. I believe you would have heard of him by now; that little 'Zero Year' debacle was his scheme."

Edward smirked proudly, puffing out his chest as Crane raised an eyebrow slowly. He couldn't tell whether Crane was now looking at him with impressed awe or discontent. He didn't seem to change his facial expression very often. Nevertheless, Edward was proud of that little scheme, and he gladly showed it.

"Edward," Oswald went on, "this is Dr. Jonathan Crane, the Scarecrow to the press."

Jonathan Crane continued to stare at Edward, observing him closely. There was the tiniest flicker of recognition in his expression, but it was no where near as familiar as the gaze Edward had upon him. He looked more like an observer at the zoo, finally getting a look at a prized ape he'd heard so much about - or a psychologist with a new mind to play with.

Edward's eyes narrowed, his smirk growing.

Yes, come on. You know me. I know you. We know each other.

Edward offered a hand forward and, after a moment, Jonathan reached out and took it. The two men shook hands; Jonathan pulled his away first, and not without a moment of struggle, for Edward had held tightly.

When he had his own hand back, Edward placed both of his behind his back as he smirked at the sitting man, who still regarded him with a wary frown. Edward cocked his head, eyebrow raised. There was still no sign of recognition in Crane's expression, no light bulb moment, and Edward didn't know whether to be peeved or amused.

"…I ask again," Jonathan said slowly, eyeing Edward for a moment, then bringing his gaze to Oswald, "what's this about?"

"Nothing for you to fuss about, Dr. Crane," Oswald replied. "A mere introduction between two members of the same team, is all."

Jonathan scoffed and spooned up another portion of paste. "There ain't no *team,* Cobblepot. We with masks an' gimmicks ain't a li'l *squad* ta call upon."

"We're all players in the same game, Dr. Crane. On the same side."

"Debatable at best." Jonathan popped his spoon into his mouth, then froze and darted his gaze to Edward as a noise reached his ears.

Oswald, too, turned to look; Edward was hiding his lips behind the fingers of one hand, giggling and chortling to himself. His shoulders shook with the amused sound, which rose in strength until he could no longer hide it behind his hand, and he tipped his head back to laugh freely. His arms came to wrap around his waist, hugging himself as he laughed heartily.

Jonathan and Oswald stared at him confusedly, then Jonathan slowly swallowed his food and set the hand clutching his spoon down on the table.

"Can I help you there, son?" He asked sternly, clearly taking offence, assuming Edward was laughing at him.

He assumed right.

Edward only laughed harder, catching the attention of a couple of inmates nearby; one looked on in disdain, finding the sound annoying, while the second proceeded to mimic Edward's mannerisms, putting a napkin on their head to try and copy his hair.

Jonathan only frowned harder, staring Edward down until Edward's laughter died with a few spare chuckles and a wipe of a tear from his left eye.

Edward came out of his bubble of amusement, looking to Jonathan with a smirk as he sat down opposite him on the second bench. He felt Oswald sit down beside him, heard him hiss lightly as the pressure came off his bad leg, and ignored him in favour of sitting his elbows down on the table and intertwining his fingers in front of his nose. Thankfully, Jonathan's table proved to be much cleaner than the one he and Oswald had originally sat at, and Edward decided - whether Jonathan liked it or not - that he would remain here.

“Riddle me this, Jonathan Crane,” Edward said cheerfully, “what has metre but no length, a key but no lock, and bars but no drinks?”

Jonathan’s frown absorbed confusion into it. He stared at Edward silently, looking him up and down, taking in every one of his features as if he hadn’t had a chance to do so before.

His green eyes: full of mischief, behind rectangular glasses. His head of dark brown hair: perfectly styled, slicked back and wavy and reaching just under the base of the skull, naturally curling at the ends. The facial hair: the thin sideburns that extended down to his jaw, the scruffy few hairs on his chin. His fairly scrawny body: healthy but thin all the same, definitely not the muscle of the operation. Lips looking supple and soft, not chapped at all. Creamy skin seemingly perfect and devoid of blemishes or scars, despite his young age and dealings with the Batman.

Took care of his looks, even while in the asylum; facial hair to combat the last bits of unfortunate baby fat in his cheeks; was aware of how he could annoy people; was used to being the smartest person in the room. Boyish, smug, arrogant, easily amused, overconfident, in love with himself, young - Jonathan didn’t like him already.

With so much focus put upon Edward’s features, Jonathan didn’t think much on the riddle, and decided to put an end to the silence by mulling it over in his head.

Metre…Key…Bars…

“A song,” Jonathan finally answered, and Edward’s smirk grew wider.

“Mm-hm.”

“An’ why would you be askin’ me that?”

“You tell me, *doctor.”*

Jonathan only looked more confused. He had no idea what the boy was talking about; there was no link between himself and music, not counting nursery rhymes, but he doubted Edward would know of any relation between them and himself. There was no song he sang during his crimes nor while sitting in his cell; he doubted it was a reference to his violent dancing fighting style. There was no link between himself and music at all.

“…I don’t know,” Jonathan said at last, hating every syllable that left his mouth, knowing that Edward loved hearing those three words.

Just like that, Edward’s smirk widened, but Jonathan did catch it falter just slightly before its growth spurt. “…No. You don’t, do you?”

Jonathan tilted his head just slightly.

“Well, then you can riddle me *this,* Jonathan Crane: I make you weak at the worst of all times. I keep you safe, I keep you fine. I make your hands sweat and your heart race. What am I?”

This one was realised much sooner than the last; Jonathan's frown turned deadpanned. "Fear."

"Precisely." Edward cocked his head. "I imagine you know that one well. The answer, that is, not the riddle. Not really your preferred topic, are they? Riddles."

"There's a reason you're the Riddler and I'm the Scarecrow," Jonathan said tersely, "Mr. Nygma."

"Indeed." Edward's smug smirk only widened. "Though, why you're the Scarecrow now… that is a wonder, eh? Being a doctor didn't do it for you? You had to go out and get something…more? Was it the boredom, doctor?" Edward's eyes narrowed. "Or something else? Did people just…not understand you at your old career? Did they question your *authority?* Your qualifications? Perhaps you just weren't…smart enough."

Jonathan stared Edward down, food now forgotten as the two men locked gazes.

There came a tense silence at the table, one that Oswald understood fine and well that he had no part of, but that didn't stop him frowning and casting his own gaze back and forth between the two men like an invisible tennis match was taking place between their noses. Neither man reacted to him nor did they ever take their gaze from the other's eyes. No hesitation, no insecurity, no fear.

Finally, Jonathan came out of his statuesque state, putting down his spoon and leaning forward on his arms, his stare steely and strict as he looked straight into Edward's eyes. His tone, however, was soft. "I, Mr. Nygma, am the one sitting here with a PhD, an MD, two Masters and a bachelor's degree, qualifications that will actually get me somewhere in not only this city, but life. You, on the other hand, are sitting there on an empty Trojan Horse, completely bare of any accomplishments besides playing dictator for a time before a man dressed as a bat kicked your nose in. You've ducked yer head and placed your hands in front of it, despite feeling in charge in this conversation; I presume you're still self-conscious about the crookedness of a broken nose. I see you have rampant narcissism, a condition usually stemming from insecurity and delusions in which one imagines themselves as more important than they really are. Insecurity. Perhaps that's why you're so quick to tell people of your intelligence; there's something to prove to someone. You're a young man, no relations such as spouse or children present, so I'll suggest a parental figure. Mother? Father? Either way, they're not *here,* Mr. Nygma, so you can drop your make-believe Einstein act and answer me this," he cocked his head slowly, "what're you *afraid of?"*

Edward's smirk had faded, and so Jonathan knew he'd hit the nail on the head.

Edward's thumbs rubbed against his forefingers as he hesitated, then slowly set his arms down on the table. "Somebody doesn't like having his intelligence insulted."

"Somebody doesn't like where he came from," Jonathan replied, then sniffed. His neck twitched, breaking his expression briefly, and he rolled his shoulder. His gaze flicked down to his tray, where his faint reflection looked back at him.

Beside Edward, Oswald's face slowly fell in weary recognition. He straightened up in his seat, clutching his cane tightly beneath the table. "…What fast friends we're making," he said; neither man looked at him. "I trust, then, that you both have what you needed from this encounter."

Jonathan stared hard at Edward, lifted his spoon and finished his plate then and there. He threw the spoon down as he chomped at the paste, splashing tiny grey droplets onto the table, which made Edward flinch backwards to avoid them.

Jonathan smirked at him, let out a sharp bark of a cruel chuckle, then rose from his seat. "My meal is finished and my purpose here is moot. Evening, gentlemen."

With that, he turned on his heel and left the mess hall, not once looking back at them and striding with the confidence of a man who had nothing to lose.

There was silence between Edward and Oswald, then Oswald sighed. "I didn't realise your intentions were to antagonise him, Edward."

"I wouldn't have," Edward replied, "if he hadn't done it first."

Oswald raised an eyebrow.

"I know him, Oswald." Edward smirked. "From before the mask. I knew I had met him before, I just had to be sure. It's him. I knew it was him." He chuckled. "Of course I knew it…" His face fell and he looked to the Penguin. "You broke into the conversation, gave him an exit lane. Why? Why did you do that? I was having fun."

Oswald sighed. "If you knew him that well, Edward, then you would've known what your actions were doing."

"Making an old man grumpy?" Edward barked out a laugh, keeping his head tipped back to point his nose into the air (he wished Crane had seen him do it), eyes shut proudly. "Seemed like an inevitable outcome. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Not quite."

Edward frowned, opening one eye to look at Oswald.

Oswald cast his gaze to the doorway of the mess hall, then back to Edward. "For you and I, Edward, names like 'the Riddler' and 'the Penguin' are just that: names. But for Dr. Crane, 'the Scarecrow' has more weight behind it than one might first think."

Edward opened his other eye, turning his head slightly to show Oswald his irritated confusion.

"The costume is inspired, as is the weaponry. He didn't just choose a scarecrow to be his image." He looked back to the doorway and nodded toward it. "His body language toward the end of your discussion - that wasn't a nervous tic. It was a fight within the mind, a warning to those watching, and a sign of who was about to pay us a visit."

Edward stared at him, connecting the dots, replaying Jonathan's twitching and Oswald's words in his mind.

"The costume is inspired -"

(There was one before him; someone with the same or a similar image.)

- His neck twitched, breaking his expression briefly, and he rolled his shoulder -

(He's holding something back.)

"- a warning to those watching -"

(It's something…dangerous. Exciting! Anger issues? Didn't show any before. Not anger issues.)

"- and a sign of who was about to pay us a visit."

(He's holding someone back. Not his anger issues.)

"…Split personality."

Oswald nodded once. "Precisely." He cleared his throat. "I imagine your taunting of Dr. Crane was irritating Scarecrow; Dr. Crane's twitching was to keep him back."

Edward snorted. "And what would have happened if he didn't?"

"You'd be dead."

Edward frowned.

Oswald cleared his throat, then coughed a few times into one fist. He stretched his arms above his head, clearing his throat at the same time, then patted his own chest and breathed calmly through his nose, eyes shut as he let himself relax. His eyes were still shut as he said to Edward, "Excuse me."

Edward nodded his forgiveness, despite knowing Oswald wouldn't see it. He knew a binder-wearer's exercise when he saw it.

Oswald cleared his throat once more before finally speaking again, "Dr. Crane is controllable. He has a temper, but he's more content to keep his fists to himself and use his words to incapacitate his bullies. I concur in your enjoyment of riling him up." He chuckled. "I never claimed he and I are friends; if anything, I merely see him as an opportunity, and the feeling is mutual. But Scarecrow? He is an entirely different story. This is not a setting to provoke him in."

Edward tilted his head. "You're scared of him."

"Pah! No. He's a fictional character created by a deranged man. I'm just smart enough - and coherent enough - to know that he would have slaughtered you before any of the guards

could say, ‘Red alert’.”

“With no weapon?” Edward asked in amusement, raising an eyebrow.

“He had a weapon.”

Edward faltered, then slowly looked down at the plastic spoon Jonathan had dropped. In his rush to avoid the fallen droplets of spit and food, he hadn’t even noticed what Crane had done to it: the curved end was bitten in half, leaving the utensil with sharp edges to dig into a fleshy neck.

Edward stared at it, wide-eyed and shocked, for a few seconds…and then he began to grin.

“I don’t like that look on your face, my friend.” Oswald leaned upon his cane, regarding Edward out of the corner of his eye.

Edward reached into his pocket, picking out the spare napkin he’d collected earlier. He smoothed it over his hand, then reached over and plucked the broken spoon from the table, holding it up to look it over. From behind the napkin’s barrier, he could feel the snapped plastic; definitely sharp, definitely could’ve pierced an artery with enough force.

“Just…thinking, Oswald. Just thinking.”

…

“Now, riddle me this, fellow inmates of Arkham Asylum: with thieves, I consort, with the vilest, in short. I’m quite at ease in depravity, yet all divines use me and savants can’t lose me, for I am the centre of gravity. What am I?”

“A fuckin’ dead man if you don’t shut up, Riddler!” came a voice from another cell down the corridor, and Edward clicked his tongue at them as he leant forward, pressing his cheeks between the bars of his own door’s window in order to project his voice the best he could.

“No, you imbecile, it’s the letter V! Not a very good guess, was it? Now, riddle me this, *fellow inmates of Arkham Asylum -”*

A collective groan interrupted him, and Edward’s pleasant smile very quickly dropped. He stepped back from his door. His ultimate pet peeve being induced, Edward’s left eye began to twitch, then the right side of his lips soon joined it in its jerky movements until Edward was tilting his head, his face moving at its own accord.

“…Hey, he’s finally shut up…!”

Edward snapped to attention, forcing himself to get over it quickly, as a chance had been given to him, and he called out pointedly, “Riddle me this, fellow inmates of Arkham Asylum: *alive without breath, as cold as death. Never thirsty, ever drinking. Clad in mail,*

never clinking. Drowns on dry land. Thinks an island is a mountain, thinks a fountain is a puff of air. What is it?"

The door at the end of the hall opened and closed behind whoever had stepped through it. Edward could hear soft footsteps approaching, but elected to ignore them; he hated every single doctor in this damned asylum, regardless of if they had treated him or if he'd even met them or not, and didn't care for anything they had to say.

"Anyone? Anyone at all? Come on, now, don't be shy! You're all stupid and your guesses are all undoubtedly laughable, so don't feel embarrassed when you -"

"A fish."

Edward faltered, pressing himself to the bars of his door's window again, frowning in confusion. He hadn't noticed the new addition to the hallway's population approach his cell, perfectly content to ignore their presence, and the fact that they'd answered his riddle actually irritated him somewhat. The attention he sought had been delivered, but that riddle hadn't been for this *person.*

A male doctor, older than him and taller too, stood outside his door. He was staring at Edward out of the corner of his eye, a clipboard in one hand, grasped at the top and leant upon his forearm, while a pen was held in the other. He wore the lab coat uniform of Arkham Asylum employees, but underneath that was a red shirt and black tie that pointed down to black trousers and brown dress shoes. His hair was rust-coloured and cropped short, lightly spiked like shards of cinnamon, and his eyes were dark brown like wood, peering at Edward through rectangular glasses.

The nametag on his lab coat's lapel read 'Dr. Crane' and Edward filed that away to memory.

"That's obvious," Dr. Crane added; his accent was that of an Englishman, posh and crisp. He turned his attention to his clipboard and clicked the button on the end of his pen twice.

"Is it now?" Edward asked sarcastically. "Well, it seems I've found a doctor with at least one brain cell! Lucky me. In that case, let me test this one on you, doctor."

It took Dr. Crane a moment to respond; he had spent that moment ticking a box on his piece of paper. "Mr. Nygma -"

"Riddle me this, Dr. Crane: what has metre but no length, a key but no lock, and bars but no drinks?"

Dr. Crane fell silent, scratching away at the piece of paper on his clipboard with his pen. It was a report on one of his patients, Edward could see, and he was sure Dr. Crane was using it as a way to stall for time while he thought on the riddle. He had to be; Edward was sure he was getting to him, that Dr. Crane wanted to prove himself intelligent.

Dr. Crane had written two sentences before he took his pen from the page and tapped the end of it against his chapped lips. He didn't acknowledge Edward again, and Edward began to grow tense, his face falling into a frown.

“Well?” He barked, impatient.

“Hm?” Dr. Crane looked at him. “What was that, Mr. Nygma?”

Edward gritted his teeth. “What was the answer? To the riddle?”

Dr. Crane raised an eyebrow at him and asked of him, using the tone of a man who didn’t care at all about what someone was saying to him, “You told a riddle?”

Edward felt his face warm with both embarrassment and fury; he could hear a few of the inmates further down the hall giggling to themselves and making comments about finally having someone who could shut Nygma up. His fists tightened around the bars of his door’s window.

Dr. Crane hadn’t been thinking of the riddle, he wasn’t keen to prove his intelligence; he had fucking ignored him. *Nobody ignored Edward Nygma. Nobody.*

“Regardless,” Dr. Crane went on, looking back to his clipboard, “do try to be quiet from now on, Mr. Nygma. I could hear you outside, and you’re disturbing the other patients.”

With that, Dr. Crane went on his way, walking casually passed Edward’s door, head still ducked and staring at his clipboard.

Edward’s face was still burning, though much of the embarrassment had faded now, leaving only the fury behind. How dare this good-for-nothing man try and put one over on him? Who the hell did this ‘Crane’ think he was? Did he think he was superior to the Riddler?

HA!

Nobody *was superior to Edward Nygma.*

Nobody.

Edward glared in the direction Dr. Crane had left in, then called out, “You know what I find disturbing, doctor?” He extended his index finger, pointing in Dr. Crane’s direction. “How many people think your accent is real.”

He heard Dr. Crane’s footsteps come to a halt.

Edward allowed a little smirk to play with his lips; nobody tried to put one over on Edward Nygma. Nobody.

He tilted his head to try and get a better view; from what he could see of the doctor, he had turned his head to make his chin acquainted with his collarbone, using the angle of his head to listen to Edward better. His clipboard was now forgotten, still held in place as it had been before, pen still poised over the page.

The inmates up ahead had fallen silent. Crane wasn’t keeping Nygma quiet anymore, now it was the other way around, and there was nothing funny about that.

Edward felt smugness blossom in his chest, knowing now that he had won, and he tilted his head as he carried on speaking. "You're not really English; I find that obvious, though this asylum is *full of morons, so I'm not surprised no one else noticed. No - you're from elsewhere, but you're hiding where you're from behind that fake accent. What's more, you've selected an English accent! A much beloved accent over here, often associated with intelligence and manners, sometimes wealth and prosperity. That impliiiies…you're trying to prove you're smart." His smirk dropped into a pout of fake sympathy. "But why would you want to do that, doctor? Could you not do so with your skills? Or would you get judged the second you open your mouth, should you use your old tongue? There's an unfortunate stereotype associated with your homeland, isn't there, Dr. Crane? Are you…*afraid *of judgement?"*

There was an ear-splitting silence after that.

Edward watched in Dr. Crane's direction, waiting for the hurry of footsteps as Crane rushed back to demand he shut up or ask how he could possibly know all of that. He was right, he knew he was right, so Crane couldn't try to lie his way out. That only left the confusion on how Edward could know such things about someone he'd never spoken to before, only seen and heard from a distance.

The silence carried on, then Edward heard the shuffle of clothing and pressed himself to his bars to look: Dr. Crane had raised the hand holding his pen, using the tool to point to Edward's cell.

"You two."

More ruffling of clothing, more footsteps - quick, eager to please, wanting to prove themselves efficient lest they lose this job - and two orderlies came hurrying to Dr. Crane's side.

"Yes, Dr. Crane?" One of them asked.

"Sedate Mr. Nygma," Dr. Crane said, as casually as asking them their opinion on the weather (horrible, if one is curious), "I'm afraid he's becoming hysterical again."

Edward's eyes widened, a flash of outrage, and he frowned and went to snap at him that he wasn't hysterical *and if they dared to lay a finger on him, they would understand why Gotham's population now feared him. Before he could, however, the other orderly was speaking.*

"Sedate him, sir?" Edward sensed eyes on his cell door, knowing they were giving bewildered looks over at him. "But…he seems fine."

"Are you questioning my authority?" Dr. Crane asked; such a loaded question continued to be spoken so casually, so softly, that it sounded genuine rather than a hidden threat. "Or perhaps my doctorate? My role here in the asylum?"

The orderlies, however, knew better.

“N-No, sir! Honest. It’s just -”

“He’s about to start tearing his hair out,” Dr. Crane’s voice started to move, his footsteps - calm and collected, the satisfaction of a win, the smugness of a superior career - sounding out again, “trust me. I know him.”

You wish you did, *Edward thought bitterly.*

“Sedate him, please. Before he hurts himself.”

Edward waited, the hairs on his arms beginning to stand on end as the tension thickened around him in a bubble of tar, then two pairs of footsteps drew closer to his cell, putting more strength into them than the two people actually had, trying to prove themselves worthy of the task. In a matter of seconds, there were two men outside of his door; both taller than him, one burly and one skinny, the skinny one with black hair and the burly one with none at all.

The skinny one collected his keys from his belt and Edward instinctively backed away from the door, hands rising to his chest to try and protect himself, stuck in loose fists that would do no good against them. Any hits he threw out would be like a baby hitting a brick wall.

The door opened and the two men stepped in.

“Alright, Nygma, c’mon,” the burly one said, “nice and easy, now.”

“I am not *hysterical!” Edward shouted. “I’m completely calm! Now, get out! Get out and - Don’t touch me, don’t touch me!!”*

His wrist had been grabbed amidst his scared dog routine and he immediately began fighting back, kicking out at his offenders and trying to wrench his wrist free. The burly orderly’s hand was sweaty and encompassing around his wrist and he hated the feeling of it on his skin; the longer it was on him, the more violently he thrashed. The more violently he thrashed, the tighter the orderly held onto him, and they were soon fighting back against him.

“C’mon, Riddler,” the orderly bit out, “relax, will ya?”

“Get off of me!! Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, don’t touch me!!”

The skinnier man was in Edward’s peripheral vision, going to his belt where he kept cases of syringes and small bottles of drugs, both prescribed medication and anaesthetics. Edward saw him with one of those little bottles, tipping it upside down with the needle puncturing the film covering the top. He tested it, squirting some clear liquid into the air, then Edward saw him turn toward him and only fought harder.

“Settle him,” the one holding the needle said, and Edward felt himself get tugged toward his captor suddenly.

His other wrist was taken hold of, causing yet another ugly feeling that Edward tried to get away from. His wrists were held in one large hand while an arm wrapped itself around his throat and he was held against the orderly’s chest, reducing to wiggling like a scared caterpillar.

He continued to curse them out, even as he felt his sleeve get rolled up and a sharp sting in his bicep as the needle penetrated his skin. Two seconds later, he was feeling drowsy and the world began to warp before his eyes.

Edward was awake long enough for him to process that they were dragging him towards his bed to lay him down, and his last thought before passing out was how badly Dr. Crane was going to pay for this.

…

Nobody knew where Jonathan Crane lived, and that was exactly how he liked it.

Before his life of crime, Crane had lived in an apartment over on Miagani Island, the quiet neighbour amongst college students and old women who never seemed to have enough sugar. He led a dull, fairly normal life; did the daily crossword puzzle over breakfast, dressed for work, went off to his job, returned to eat dinner and then went to sleep. Same schedule everyday, a break taken between dinner and sleeping to grade tests and essays back when he'd been a teacher at Gotham University, and to check patient notes when he'd been a psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum.

The apartment had been lost to him after his first stay at Arkham as a patient; his landlord hadn't gotten the memo, and Crane had returned to find many of his belongings gone. He'd taken the ones he'd managed to save and left.

With both of his jobs having gone downhill, Crane had given up on Gotham - it was a hellhole, a cesspit of misery - and he had run with his tail between his legs out of the city during a rainstorm. He hadn't wanted to return home, but it'd been the only place he could think of, and he'd been planning on hitching a ride when he reasoned the storm was too bad to be out and about right now.

Along the road he travelled was an old house, and Crane had taken shelter in it until the rain stopped - that had been the plan, at least.

The house was now no longer shelter: it was home.

Decrepit and old, the house was seen as abandoned to those out of the know-how - which was everybody but Crane. A two-story abode with an attic and a front porch that Jonathan would occasionally sit on to feed the crows, it was in desperate need of fixing and a paint job. The wood that made it was splintered and discoloured and one of the windows was shattered (Crane theorised a baseball had once flown through it). Water was supplied from the well nearby and electricity was only possible through the generator Jonathan had gotten for himself, having hired a couple of his goons to carry it for him.

The inside was no better; the furniture that had been there since before Jonathan moved in was mouldy and broken. Two couches, a television set and a coffee table were all that was in

the small living room; the TV had never come on, one of the couches had an unidentifiable stain on the back (Jonathan theorised it was bile) and the other was missing half its stuffing, one of the seats not even functional.

The kitchen was the only room on the ground floor Jonathan had made a real effort to clean the grime off of, since that was where he stored his food, what little he kept around. The basics only, the table was covered in beakers and test tubes for Jonathan's experiments. He'd never eaten at it anyway.

Up a rickety staircase with a banister one couldn't lean too hard upon were the next set of rooms. Jonathan had made an effort to clean the bathroom, if only because that was where most germs would occupy, and had taken refuge in the bedroom at the end of the hall, which featured his desk, a few shelves of books and files he needed for his research, a few boxes of his belongings and a mattress on the floor that was propped up with the remains of the bed frame, as stained as the sofa downstairs. Jonathan didn't sleep on it much; he preferred the aforementioned stained couch.

All in all, the house was a fucking bombsite and not only was it a wonder of how it was still standing, but that Jonathan hadn't contracted some deadly illness (surprisingly or not, given his status as a scientist, he kept himself very clean in contrast to his home). But it was preferred over any residence in Gotham City itself. He didn't want to deal with neighbours or landlords, and not just because he was now a wanted criminal. No doubt they had not only heard of his past crimes, but that he had recently escaped from Arkham Asylum.

This house was safer - nobody knew where Jonathan Crane lived.

So why the fuck was there knocking on his front door?

Jonathan froze as soon as he heard it, leant over his desk and his notebook full of his latest data on how his fear toxin was coming along. He waited a second or two, testing if he had just been hearing things, then heard another knock. Slowly, he sat up, turning his head to look at his bedroom door.

Nobody could know he was out here, nobody. Even if someone did, who would *knock* rather than attempt to sneak in or break the door down? Crane had bought a good lock for it, but they weren't to know that.

Jonathan hesitated, then put his pen down and stood up from his chair slowly. His reaction was both automatic and robotic; he reached for the sickle laying upon the windowsill above his desk, put there due to lack of space on the desk itself and a discomfort in keeping it on his belt. Weapon in hand, he then reached for the burlap mask by his notebook and lifted it to pull it over his head.

The mask was stuffy and somewhat itchy, but he was getting used to it quickly. There were slits in the material for Jonathan to see out of, just beneath button eyes that made up half of Scarecrow's facial features. The other half consisted of a wide, thread-made smile, stretched right across, from burlap cheek to burlap cheek. The expression was a contradiction to both personalities' general moods, but they found that made the mask all the more scarier.

Nobody should have a smile that wide whilst committing crime.

Now with both weapon and mask, Jonathan slowly walked over to the door, exiting his bedroom while being careful to avoid stepping on any of the creakier floorboards, lest he give away his movement to the intruder.

The door was locked, he had to remind himself, and so was not an option; it would be heard if he unlocked it. Peeking out of the window was too tricky to do without being seen, given its placement (and the large hole through it), so Jonathan opted for going out the back way.

Nothing back there but the well, his truck and his motorcycle.

Jonathan took his sickle from its holster, holding it tightly within his left hand. His heart pounded in his chest, blood rushing in his ears, as he edged his way around the side of his house, the sound of his adrenaline all the more louder with the mask over his head keeping most other sounds out.

Who the hell could it be? Police? No, they would've called out to him, told him to come out with his hands up. They wouldn't have known where to look for him, anyway. He left no traces; didn't have to, since his escape from Arkham involved forging papers and copying his psychiatrist's signature. By the time anybody had realised what had happened and why Dr. Snow was so confused at her patient's disappearance, Jonathan was curled up and fast asleep on his designated sleeping sofa.

Batman would have just broken through the window or even the roof if it were him. He didn't knock on doors, he just invited himself in. Jonathan had experienced Batman's idea of a hearty hello as a university professor, a respected psychiatrist and - more recently - a professional criminal. There was never any difference in such things; he imagined Batman did the same with the GCPD headquarters.

Oswald didn't seek Jonathan out; none of the other Rogues did. Not out here, anyway. If anybody wanted his attention, they had better find one of his hideouts and hope he was in it. If not, then they had better hope their patience held out until he returned. He had no mobile phone to acquire the number of and no address that he was willing to give out. It was all one big game of *Where's Jonathan?*.

So who the hell was currently stepping off of his front porch, sighing to themselves so dejectedly? He could hear them, hear the way the wood creaked beneath their feet, hear them stumble on that wretched second step that always seemed to break no matter how many times Jonathan fixed it, hear the dry soil crunch beneath their steps as they walked back to the road -

Jonathan dashed out from his hiding place, racing toward the intruder without taking in a detail of them, for his focus was entirely on how his own two hands gripped the handle of his sickle together and raised it high above his head, ready to strike downwards and pierce the person's skull as they turned -

"GOOD LORD!"

Jonathan brought himself to a stop when the voice registered. He froze on the spot, sickle mid-strike, the tip of the blade pointing at his intruder; from within the confines of his mask, he blinked.

Edward Nygma stared back up at him, eyes wide with shock from within the holes of his eye mask, a long strip of black fabric that was tied behind his head and dangled down to his shoulders. He'd stumbled when he heard Jonathan's running and had spun around and tried to run away at the same time; he was now sprawled out on the soil on his back, one arm bent over his face to defend himself. His green suit was now ruffled, golden cane having been flung out of his hand during his fall, and a green fedora laid upside-down nearby, exposing Edward's brown hair to the elements.

Edward panted lightly for a few moments while Jonathan came down from his adrenaline high, then the Riddler was scowling and baring his teeth. "What is the *matter* with you?! Pouncing out of nowhere like some deranged *wildcat!* What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?!"

Jonathan stared down at him in silence for a few moments, then said, "Yer on my land."

Edward scoffed. "And this is how you treat guests? No wonder you're here by your lonesome!"

"Nobody's supposed ta be on my land. I don't have guests," he cocked his head, "jus' trespassers."

Edward scoffed again and went to roll over so he could push himself up, grabbing for his cane while he did so. He ripped it from the dirt, shaking it in the air while on his knees to rid it of soil, then used it to help push himself up. When he was on his feet, he snatched his hat from the ground and hooked his cane on his arm while he dusted off the fedora's top. When he was satisfied, he plopped it onto his head, then looked to Jonathan again.

"I knocked. Politely."

"Still intrudin' on my land. People aren't supposed to be on my land."

"But I knocked."

"And I thank you for your courtesy, but you're still not supposed to be on my land."

Edward hummed and dusted off his blazer, giving Jonathan the time to look him up and down.

He was no longer in the ragged state he'd seen him in while they were in Arkham together. Now, Edward was dressed in a pristine but slightly informal green suit, the trousers and blazer a matching, bright shade of green. His shirt was black and buttoned right to the top, the collar wide but pulled down, neat and tidy. His hands were covered with leather gloves that were coloured bright purple, and in one of them did he clutch a thin, golden cane shaped like a question mark. The same punctuation mark was a badge on the side of his fedora, sharing equal space upon the green hat and black ribbon.

Far more presentable than the orange overalls of Arkham Asylum, but nothing that would impress Jonathan.

Edward cleared his throat and decided this was enough to start the conversation anew, which he did with a twirl and a gentle hand holding its fingertips to the base of his throat. It was with an easy, sleazy smile that he spoke. “Before this conversation goes on, I must ask: am I speaking to Jekyll or Hyde?”

Jonathan sighed glumly through his nose. “Never heard that one before…”

“Ah, sharp wit and dry sarcasm. I have the pleasure of being in *Dr. Crane’s* presence then?”

Jonathan sighed again.

“Brilliant. Just who I wanted to speak to.” Edward cleared his throat. “Do you remember me, Dr. Crane?”

Jonathan resisted the urge to tell him it wasn’t easy to forget people like him, if only because he was in no mood for another argument.

From within his mask, he looked Edward up and down, then replied with both caution and exasperation, “Riddler.”

“Good, good.” Edward’s smile lifted at one end. “No need for another awkward introduction, then. Now -” Edward stopped himself, frowning lightly as Jonathan sniffed and turned his back on him, walking leisurely over to his own porch to climb the three steps. He missed the second one, ever broken, and Edward was perturbed to find him unlocking his front door.

The Riddler scrambled to follow him, briefly interrupted by tripping on the second step and yelping in shock, before he continued his scurry. By then, Crane had unlocked his door and was stepping through the threshold, sickle still in hand.

When Edward approached, Jonathan closed the door down to a fraction, frowning at him through the gap, despite his mask covering it. “You ain’t comin’ in.”

Edward peeked under Jonathan’s arm, saw the atrocious state of things, and promptly recoiled with a scrunched expression of disgust. “I don’t *want to.”*

“Good. Cause you ain’t.”

Edward frowned up at him, then cleared his throat and pushed forth his more polite persona. He lifted a hand, tipping it upside down in a gesture to Jonathan’s head. “May I ask that you remove the mask so we may talk properly?”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes in suspicion, then slowly reached up and pulled the mask from his head. His hair was a bit ruffled from being under the material, but nothing that would distract either of them.

“Excellent,” Edward said. “Now -”

“How’d you know I was here, boy?” Jonathan said to interrupt him.

Edward frowned bitterly at the interruption; Jonathan ignored his distaste for the social faux pas. *He* had a distaste for people being on his land.

Edward kept the frown on his face during his reply; apparently, one could only keep a fake smile for so long, even if they had the air of a sleazy car salesman about them.

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, please, it wasn’t difficult. Scruffy, old man who just wants his space? Knew exactly where to look.”

Jonathan cocked his head. Somehow, he doubted that Edward had gotten the idea of an abandoned, ransacked, old house on Gotham’s outskirts so quickly. ‘Just wanting his space’ could also end up with Jonathan in one of Gotham’s many clusters of warehouses or in a barn somewhere; they were more likely than a house nobody knew existed.

“Right,” he said. “This ain’t the first place you checked, is it?”

Beneath his mask, Edward’s left eye twitched.

“Right. Also: thirty-five isn’t very old.”

“In any case,” Edward snapped, slapping on a fake grin, “I’m *here,* Dr. Crane, because I have an offer for you.”

Jonathan puffed out a sigh, tilting his head downwards as he prepared for this, his hand dropping from his door to tuck its thumb into the belt loops of his jeans. He wasn’t dressed as nicely as Edward, by far, but blue jeans, brown boots and a brown button-up shirt were far more presentable than the dirty, orange overalls he wore at Arkham.

He was, however, rather unfashionable, the colours clashing horribly - especially in regards to his ginger hair and glasses - and Edward found it hard not to comment on it.

Jonathan viewed Edward through the hair that flopped over his eyes. “Do ya now?”

“Indeed.” Edward grinned and puffed out his chest. “I’m creating a new death-trap, Dr. Crane, and I’d like to request some of your toxin for it. I’ve been told about your little drug; I hear it’s effective in ripping apart the minds of Gothamites everywhere. I confess myself curious, and so I want it.” He waved a hand, eyes shut as he exclaimed, “So! Name your price! We’ll discuss how much you’ll -”

“It ain’t fer sale.”

Edward’s eyes opened in a second, smile dropping in an instant, hand frozen in a gesture at Jonathan. “What?”

“It ain’t fer sale,” Jonathan repeated, “and I have no interest in taking part in any plans of yours, boy.” He straightened up, sniffing and peering at Edward distastefully. “Now, if that’s all you wanted, you can take yer leave.”

“Wha - But -” Edward’s mouth opened and closed, remnant of the fish from the riddle he’d told Jonathan last year. *“What?”*

Jonathan cocked his head, looking Edward up and down. The opening and closing jaws, the genuine surprise, the sudden lack of words. All rather telling, all rather pathetic.

“You ain’t used to rejection, are ya, son?” Jonathan asked in a casual drawl.

Edward’s brow scrunched up; he could feel the psychologist’s stare upon him, an expert gaze that was seeking every little detail about him, already conjuring stupid theories and ideas in his mind. He was just like the morons at Arkham, insisting he had mental illnesses and disorders. Hell, he’d *been* one of the morons at Arkham, once upon a time.

“I’m offering you money,” Edward said, “any amount of it.” He looked distastefully at the doorway. “You could buy yourself a better house.”

“I don’t need a better house.”

Edward scoffed. “Denial. That’s cute.” He propped his hand on his hip, the other hand stabbing his cane into Jonathan’s porch as he tried to contain himself. “Don’t tell me you’re one of the few Gothamites that doesn’t care for *money.* Anybody else would be jumping at this chance.”

“I am not ‘anybody else’.” Jonathan cocked his head the other way. “I have no interest in selling my toxin, especially not ta you. I have no interest in your plans and I have no interest in you, Riddler. Now, do me a favour an’ leave.”

“But it’s a really good scheme!” Edward exclaimed before he could stop himself, stomping his foot involuntarily. He would scold himself for that move later; he’d intended to keep a level head throughout this encounter.

Then again, he’d also intended for Dr. Crane to take him up on his offer. This interaction was just full of surprises!

“Oh-ho,” Jonathan tucked his free hand into his pocket, thumb sticking out as he tipped his head back slightly, amusement laced within his tone, “it’s a scheme, now, is it?”

Edward gritted his teeth. “It’s a *really good scheme* and you should feel *glad* to have been offered a part in it.”

“And yet I remain uncaring,” Jonathan replied.

“Then you’re a bigger moron than I first thought.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows raised, a mixing surge of both amusement and irritation coming forth within his gut. Truly a narcissist, this one; Jonathan was quickly growing tired of this conversation, and the urge to slam either his sickle’s blade or the door in Edward’s face was growing stronger and stronger with every breath the Riddler sucked in and exhaled.

He didn't like being called a moron, he never liked having his intelligence called into question, but arguing would only show Edward how he was riling him up, and he refused to let himself be emotionally vulnerable here. Edward was not going to be the dominant one of this conversation.

Besides, it was funny to see the Riddler squirm because he wasn't getting his own way.

Jonathan raised a hand slowly, resisted the urge to grab Edward by the throat and drag him into his house to his doom, and scratched at his cheek idly. "You like riddles," he said slowly, "don't you, Mr. Nygma?"

Edward bristled. "I didn't build up my identity around them out of spite for the mentally challenging." He frowned at Jonathan in silence for a moment, then his expression fell into one of realisation. "Oh! Is that it? You intend to tell me a riddle and should I solve it, you'll give me your toxin? Ha, *ha!"* He grinned in delight and clapped his hands excitedly, applauding himself. "Excellent! This will take mere moments, then." He curled and uncurled a finger at Jonathan in a gesture. "Come on, then, let's have it."

"No," Jonathan said, making Edward's grin falter, "nothin' like that. I was just wonderin' if this conversation was too difficult a riddle fer you to understand, so I'll make it easier on yer poor, inflated head by tellin' you ta read my lips."

Jonathan lunged out of the doorway, one hand shoving the door aside as he threw his face toward Edward's. His hand remained there, holding up all of his weight (which wasn't much), his other arm dangling as he bent at the waist, nose mere centimetres from Edward's. He took note of how Edward flinched and almost jumped away from him, hands rising to defend himself.

Interesting.

"You are not having any of my toxin," he said, purposefully slow, allowing the syllables to mould his lips. "End of story."

Edward stared, wide-eyed and cautious, and Jonathan stared at him right back, exasperated.

After a moment, Edward's eyelids fell halfway as he put on an expression he probably wanted to be a frown, but it was a pout instead. A childish, bratty pout. "…You need some mouthwash."

"An' you need better contacts if you can't see that this conversation is over." Jonathan straightened back up, pulling himself back through the threshold of his home. He gave Edward one last disappointed look before turning away from him. *"Goodbye,* Mr. Nygma."

"Wait!"

Jonathan threw his head back to curse the Gods before spinning around. *"What?"*

He saw Edward give a light flinch at his snapping, but was far too irritated at this point to appreciate it.

Edward was frowning tightly, hands fidgeting and playing with his cane. Not having control of the situation clearly made him uneasy and uneasiness brought about fidgeting. Cute.

“I’ll offer you a different position in this plan, then: come with me. On the heist.”

“Yer reducing me to a henchman now?” Jonathan asked sarcastically, leaning on elbow on his doorway. “This oughta be good.”

“Upgrading you to a partner, more like.” Edward tipped his head back slightly. *“You* can use your toxin yourself. I won’t touch any of it.”

Jonathan rubbed his chin with one hand and smacked his lips as he pretended to think. “This pleases me,” Jonathan admitted, “but I already told you: I don’t care about you or your plans. Therefore the offer is pointless and yer continued presence here is even more so. So, do me a favour,” Jonathan snatched hold of the door, “and leave.”

With that said, he promptly slammed the door in Edward’s face.

The nerve of the man, turning up out of the blue and begging for his toxin. They hadn’t had a good meeting in the asylum and had promptly avoided each other afterwards - even after Oswald’s lawyers had gotten the Penguin out and Edward had been left without company - until both had escaped. What made Edward think Jonathan would be happy to see him? What made him think Jonathan would so easily say, “Oh, yes, Edward, here’s some of my toxin, use it as you please!”

The very thought made Jonathan feel sick. He didn’t like anyone using his toxin. If another Rogue wanted some of Jonathan’s wonderful drug, they would have to be prepared to team up with the Scarecrow because Jonathan didn’t give his toxin to hands that couldn’t use it properly. Nobody used it properly.

There was the additional issue of Edward knowing where Jonathan lived now. This was a danger; he enjoyed being here by his lonesome, he enjoyed nobody knowing where he was. Now, the Riddler would know. He should’ve just dragged Edward into his home to be tortured, then he could’ve made sure Edward didn’t blab to anybody else. Better yet, he could’ve killed him. The world would do better without a running mouth like that one in it.

“That truly is a shame, doctor,” Edward called from the other side of the door, making Jonathan roll his eyes, “it’s just…I was curious about the effects one’s fear would have on their intelligence and ability to think coherently enough to escape a maze.”

Record scratch.

Jonathan froze.

“I was hoping you too would be interested, if only you had allowed me to explain my *really good scheme.* I’ll take the door slamming in my face, however, as a firm ‘no’.” He sighed dejectedly. “I was really hoping…Oh. Well. Good day to you, doctor.”

He heard Edward walking away from the door.

Jonathan chewed his lip, hands opening and closing.

He hadn't done an experiment like that before. Drugging people to find out their fears, forcing them to tell him their traumas, using his toxin to get revenge on people by frightening them so far out of their wits that they never crawled back in again - or, they keeled over. It'd all been a sufficient amount of research, he had good notes, he crafted batch after batch of his drug according to the information he collected. He was content with it all.

But he'd never…He didn't make death-traps. He didn't make elaborate mazes or tricky puzzles. He didn't *test* his patients. He'd never known how their fear might affect their ability to save their own lives. He'd tied them down and made them helpless, unless a certain pointy-eared, flying rodent heard about their disappearance and got to them in time. Jonathan knew fear affected their ability to answer questions and fight back, but when left to their own devices in a maze…He'd never seen that before.

He wanted to see that.

He knew what Edward was doing, tempting him like this, but…but he wanted to see that.

Jonathan licked his lips slowly.

He couldn't possibly team up with the Riddler, though. Not after he'd made such a show of turning him down; it'd been Edward's fault that he'd used such force, being as whiny as he was, but the interaction had still happened. He'd already decided he didn't like the Riddler, anyway, so why would he subject himself to such torture?

Not to mention working with the other Rogues - as people had started to call the costumed lot; he believed Harvey Dent might've coined the term in an interview or something - in general was a bad idea. He often just liked to keep it to the two of them…

But…the possibly of research. The information, the *fear*...

He would have to proceed with caution, of course. Edward could've been playing with him, he could easily turn around and betray Jonathan. Perhaps leave him to the Bat after all was said and done. Edward was still another Rogue, after all; if they were to work together, it wouldn't mean a *partnership.* It would mean a temporary alliance.

His own cravings overpowering his sense, Jonathan turned and opened the door again. "Hold on."

Edward had stepped off the porch by then; he was halfway across what could classify as Jonathan's front garden. He'd looked over his shoulder at the sound of Jonathan's voice, plastering on a fake look of innocence. Jonathan knew how smug he really felt.

"Yes?" Edward asked.

Jonathan hesitated. He hated that expression, he wanted to take Edward's mind and shatter it for daring to be smug in his presence. But he loved the prospect of seeing all of that terror, and that was stronger than his hatred of Edward's face.

"…Walk me through your ideas," Jonathan said slowly, choosing his words carefully, "and allow me to come to my own judgement."

Edward didn't hide his smirk this time. He turned around easily, stabbing the tip of his cane into the soil between his shoes. Whatever foul mood Jonathan's rejection had put him in, it'd gone away very, very quickly. A symbol of annoying behaviour that Jonathan could just barely tolerate.

"The maze's structure is already pre-built," Edward said, "I just need to construct the riddles and acquire some of your fear toxin. You seem to dislike other people having their hands on it, so the offer for you to join me remains on the proverbial table. We'll go together to find the players, as it were; I have one person in mind. If you do too, you're welcome to select them for the experiment." He cocked his head slightly. "I'll show you where my death-trap is tonight; you can judge it for yourself. Then you and I can go and get our subjects. Does this sound alright with you?"

Jonathan frowned as he pondered. He couldn't imagine where a death-trap could be built in this city; Edward had said it was a maze. Where would he keep a maze? Was it indoors? Outdoors? That was intriguing - and terrifyingly exciting. A maze! How perfect for scaring people! And there would be a funny scarecrow-related pun in there somewhere; it was all coming together, really.

Jonathan chewed his lip. He didn't think he had anyone in particular in mind for the experiments - besides Batman, but that was a given. He could only imagine who it was Edward wanted to bring in as a victim.

"…Sounds fine," Jonathan said.

"Excellent," Edward chirped. "Then we have a deal, yes?"

"I suppose. But this doesn't mean I'm accompanying you fer this *scheme.* My decision will be made later. If this *death-trap* of yours is up to my standards, I'll help."

Edward snorted. "I don't need 'help' with anything, Dr. Crane, but I won't argue with you on semantics. I know what you meant. So!" He walked up to Jonathan briskly, practically dancing up the three steps. He held out a hand. "Shake on it?"

Jonathan glanced at his hand critically.

"…Oh, don't worry. I'm not Joker, you won't be getting zapped with a joy buzzer, and this isn't some mannequin hand I've shoved up my sleeve."

Jonathan hesitated, then reached out and shook Edward's hand firmly. "Alright, then."

The men let go at the same time, and Edward smiled at him and set the hand with his other one on his cane's curve.

"Who will I have the pleasure of working with, by the way?" Edward asked with a casual tilt of the head.

Jonathan shrugged a shoulder. “Most likely myself. Unless we need my assistant.”

“Hm.” Edward’s smile picked up at one side. “Well. I hope we *will* be needing him. I’m hoping to have an audience with the man who wanted to stab me in the neck with a broken spoon.”

Jonathan, for the briefest of moments, smirked. He stepped back into his home and gave Edward one last, neutral look. “Goodbye, Mr. Nygma.” He shut the door calmly.

Edward stared at the closed door for a few seconds, then turned around and stepped off of Jonathan’s porch, a pleased little smirk on his lips and the air of superiority about him.

“Phase One.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Edward Nygma makes a new acquaintance in Arkham.

Chapter Notes

Characters: Edward Nygma, Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow, the poor unfortunate bastards who cross their path; mentions of Edward's parents, Batman, various asylum patients and staff members, Penguin, Joker, Mad Hatter, Jeremiah Arkham.

Pairings: None.

Warnings: musophobic imagery (phobia of mice), kidnapping, human experimentation, forced drugging, use of explosives, assault, attempted strangulation; mentioned child abuse, patient mistreatment, body horror, explosives.

Notes: How my versions of Edward and Jonathan first met. Like a lot of DC fanfic writers, I pick and choose what material I canonise for my characters, so expect some comic mentions.

Extra notes: Chapter took so long due to mental health issues. I'm not happy about the wait either.

A WanderVerse fic.

Chapter 2 of 2.

All material belongs to DC Comics (although my interpretations of the characters are used).

They met at the docks.

Edward arrived first, predictably. He was driven there in a black car, the driver of which he told to drive away as soon as he was out of the backseat.

He was dressed in full Riddler garb, though had now added a white tie to his ensemble, a purple question mark printed upon the front; he didn't really have a reason behind putting it on, but he was entitled to mix his uniform up every now and then. After all, the suit and

fedora weren't technically his first Riddler outfit, but nobody needed to know that (nor remember, in the case of the cops who may have met him back then).

Hopefully, Dr. Crane would appreciate his effort, given the man didn't excel at putting any in himself.

Edward walked along the main boardwalk, looking out at the piers that reached toward the water.

There was a gentle lapping of tiny waves against the wooden poles descending into the deep; Edward shut his eyes and inhaled softly, enjoying the moment of calm.

As a child, he had often sat on the pavement by a drain outside his house and listened to the water trickle. He'd found it a soothing sound that helped him concentrate and calm down. He'd bring his riddle books and work through them as the water moved beneath him. It was a calming escape away from his father, who often called his fascination with the sound stupid and childish.

Edward had had to hold his tongue; how could a child be anything *but* childish?

Of course, the clamp on his tongue hadn't held: he'd asked his father that very question, and had gotten a black eye and a numb jaw for his troubles.

He had stopped listening to the water at that particular drain after that. There were always others, and there had been nothing Edward had liked more back then than being away from home. It was why he'd moved to Gotham as soon as he was able.

This place might've been miserable, but there was no worse Hell to Edward Nygma than Waterbury, Connecticut.

"Riddler."

Edward didn't get a chance to stop himself from jumping. He spun around, cane brandished and ready to use as a weapon, only to pause.

Before him stood a towering but lanky figure. It carried the scent of a barn with it, and that wasn't surprising considering the amount of straw stuffed into its clothing. The brown trousers and baggy shirt were covered in patches and stitches that barely contained the straw bursting forth. The coat - dark blue in colour - descended to the middles of the man's thighs and had also suffered purposefully-placed damage, a few holes poked in the left breast and the shoulders, but the sleeves were practically shredded and barely hanging together, exposing the forearms that confirmed this thing to be human, releasing more clumps of jutting straw, and providing a peek of the long sleeves of the shirt underneath. A row of skulls was attached to his belt. There were brown, fabric shoes on his feet, all covered in stitches, and matching leather gardening gloves that hugged his skinny hands to emphasise their twig-like appearance. As if he wasn't tall enough already, a wide-brimmed hat sat upon his head, the top flopped over and gesturing down his back.

Edward felt his face pale when the moonlight caught the curved blade posing above the figure's head, belonging to the long scythe clutched in their right hand.

Gotham's natural darkness made him panic, but then the details all came together, and he recognised the thing's face. The button eyes and stitched smile were too familiar to ignore.

After a moment, Edward smiled. *"Lovely* costume."

Jonathan's eyes narrowed within the holes beneath the mask's buttons; he was wearing his contacts, judging by the lack of glasses. He merely grunted in response to Edward's comment, then cocked his head, rustling the straw around his neck.

Edward imagined that must've been frightfully itchy for him.

"Where is this death-trap I'm supposed ta see, then?" Jonathan asked. His voice was lightly muffled by the small, half gas mask he wore beneath the burlap one.

"Straight to the point, doctor!" Edward said with an erected index finger. He used that finger to gesture for Jonathan to follow. "Right this way, if you please. Step lively."

Edward led the way down the dock's path, sensing Jonathan follow along behind him. The man seemed to naturally walk silently; the only giveaway that he was still behind Edward was the slight rustling of straw, and Edward only noticed it amongst the other sounds of the night because he was searching for it.

Good technique, if Jonathan wanted to be a Rogue that badly.

They walked together for a good twenty minutes, slipping in and out of alleyways, avoiding the general public lest they be shipped off to Arkham so soon after breaking out. Edward had a knack for hiding, but Jonathan seemed to be a level higher than him, for several times did Jonathan grab Edward's shoulder or the dangling pieces of his eye mask to steer him another way, just as somebody roamed by them.

Edward didn't appreciate somebody being better-skilled than him, and his natural aversion to being touched by someone he didn't trust nor like made him tense immediately and momentarily thrash to remove Jonathan's hand, but there was something about the way Jonathan so silently grabbed him, directed him and then gently pushed him in that direction that made him smirk every time. Perhaps it was the contrast between this interaction and their ones of the past or perhaps it was because of what was to come.

Finally, they walked down an alleyway with a dead end, in which Jonathan's growing suspicions reached an all-time high, and he snuck a hand to his belt to prepare an attack.

He knew he couldn't trust the Riddler; anytime now, the trick would be revealed and Edward would summon his henchmen to take Jonathan out, then they'd leave him for the Bat.

Jonathan wasn't about to let him.

"Here we are," Edward said, stopping before the wall at the end and twirling around to face Jonathan. If he noticed where Jonathan's hand currently was, he didn't indicate it, just

smirked that irritating smirk of his and gestured to the wall.

Jonathan looked at it, squinted, then looked to Edward in confusion.

Edward chuckled, then turned his back on him. He rapped his knuckles against the wall, and Jonathan's ears pricked like an animal's; it was hollow. The wall was a fake.

Edward tapped his knuckles across it in certain spots, then raised his cane and swung it at the wall like a baseball bat. A sizeable dent was left behind in the softwood plywood, so Edward took another whack at it. The dent caved in, leaving a hole, but no more damage was done beyond that.

Edward felt his face heat up in embarrassment; not only was this not as showy as he'd wanted, but it was a distinct example of his poor physical strength.

True, he favoured the brain over the brawn - as would be expected from someone who used brain teasers during their crimes - but that didn't mean he wanted to be seen as a meek man compared to his companion, who had had no trouble carrying a scythe that was as tall as he was.

He composed himself quickly, one hand to his collar to straighten his tie. He cleared his throat and went to try again, when a length of wood passed by him and made him freeze when he recognised it as the handle of Jonathan's scythe.

He stared at it blankly for a moment, then followed it to the blade, which had been inserted into the hole he'd made.

Edward looked to Jonathan, then took a couple of steps back and let him do the work.

The scythe was dragged, the blade digging into and pulling down the rest of the fragile wall, which crumbled and fell to pieces at their feet, purposefully poorly made (which only bruised Edward's ego more).

It uncovered a tiny little alcove, the real end of the alleyway. A door stood smack-bang in the middle of the wall, a green question mark spray-painted upon it.

Jonathan stared at it, then looked to Edward, who quickly patted down his suit and hair to make himself a bit more presentable before his own base.

He looked to Jonathan, smirked deviously and said nothing of Jonathan's help, then raised his cane to the little keyhole in the door. He inserted the skinny tip, heard a click, then twisted his cane to hear a second.

Edward pulled his cane out of the hole and approached the door, opening it with one arm and gesturing for Jonathan to enter. "After you."

Jonathan looked into the darkness, then shook his head. "No. You." He cocked his head and smiled sarcastically beneath his masks, despite knowing Edward wouldn't see it. "I *insist."*

Edward pursed his lips, then shrugged. "Very well."

He stepped into the darkness, disappearing from Jonathan's sight.

Jonathan stared at the spot he'd vanished into, curling and uncurling his fingers anxiously.

He refused to call Edward a genius as he so insisted he was, but even he was smarter than to walk into his own trap. There most likely wasn't one, if that was the case, and so Jonathan walked forward hesitantly. There was always the possibility that, even in darkness, Edward knew his way around whatever he had waiting for Jonathan, so while *he* was perfectly safe, Jonathan was still in danger.

He kept a firm grip on his scythe, determined to break out of whatever Edward was leading him into, and paused only when a light flicked on within the room, revealing an old elevator and Edward standing within it.

"Come along then," Edward said cheerfully.

Jonathan puffed out a sigh, then stepped into the elevator with him.

The ride down was met with silence between the two men; it would have been tricky to be heard, anyway, over the clanking and creaking metal as the carriage carried them downwards, underground. As modern as Edward's aesthetic was, this elevator looked like something from a coal mine. If it hadn't been for Edward's knack for building things, Jonathan would have feared the possibility of the thing breaking and sending them plummeting down into the abyss.

Jonathan didn't know how many metres underneath Gotham they were taken and wasn't really in the mood to ask, especially not when Edward gave him another obnoxious smirk as the carriage came to a stop.

The doors opened and Edward went to step out.

What they had arrived in was a long room that looked similar to a control centre from the action movies, with the colour scheme the Riddler was so fond of.

The control panel - littered with switches and lights and buttons and levers - was coloured dark green, the controls all coloured purple to make sure they stood out, though it was an attempt that seemed a bit futile in a room where most of everything was green and purple. A tall microphone was attached to the panel's top, under which there were three knobs and a speaker. Behind the panel was a long window that took up the entire upper half of the wall.

The wall opposite the panel had a line of cabinets set against it, presumably where Edward kept blueprints.

To the left of the cabinets, in one corner of the room, was another desk, L-shaped and wooden. Atop that were papers, at least three different pens in differing colours of ink, a pot of pencils, a monitor and keyboard, and a strange item that seemed to have once been a football helmet, with the net-like, solid facemask and hard outer shell. There was something attached to the forehead, but Jonathan wasn't about to go and examine the thing.

Who knew what the Riddler had planned for him down here, where no one could hear him scream?

To the right of the cabinets, there was a space that Jonathan mistook for empty. Upon some squinting, he found that there was actually a track carved into the floor, shaped like a square with soft corners. There were bare footprints painted with light green paint on the floor, following the track around. There was another device down there too, but it was tricky to get details from where he stood. Something was attached to the track, and something was connected to that item via a long wire.

Jonathan tilted his head at it, but Edward was gesturing for him to come closer and he did so, coming to stand beside the Riddler at the panel.

Before Jonathan could open his mouth, Edward used his cane to point in the direction he faced, and Jonathan turned his head to look, his jaw immediately dropping.

The window Jonathan had noted earlier gave them both a view of what exactly Edward had hidden beneath Gotham: a labyrinth made of stone that had an orange tint to it, that stretched to the same measurements of a football field.

As Jonathan stared, Edward reached for the panel and calmly inserted a key into the keyhole in the corner. He then pushed a button, which commanded the panelling that made up the bottom half of the wall descend downwards, sliding down into crevices in the floor made specifically for them, leaving behind the panels of glass that they had been shielding.

The entire wall now one big window, the view was improved and the two men could see the entire labyrinth.

Edward reached forward again, slowly pushing up a sliding switch.

There was a cluttering sound, which Jonathan could see was coming from the various, riddle-littered, fake walls in the top right section of the maze that snapped out to block off pathways and stop anybody's progress through the labyrinth. The more he pushed it up, the quicker they came out, slicing through the air as they shot out and shot back into the places of hiding.

With their speed, Jonathan theorised they could slice off a finger if somebody wasn't careful. Clearly, they'd been made with Batman in mind.

Who knew what the rest of these buttons and levers and switches did?

Edward twisted one of the knobs under the microphone, then slid the switch up again. They could hear the fake walls through the speaker; Jonathan understood this was used to communicate with those trapped in the labyrinth.

"Impressed?" Edward asked beside him, taking in Jonathan's look of wonder.

Jonathan came back to reality quick enough to keep some dignity.

"Satisfied. How long have you had this?"

“Longer than you might think. It wasn’t ready in time for the Zero Year. Shame, really, I had some good ideas for it.”

Jonathan hummed and observed the labyrinth, tracing his gaze over it, then spotted the long tube that followed the further-most wall on the right of the maze, eye level to the two men standing in the control room.

The top half was translucent, green glass while the bottom half remained dull, grey metal. It followed the wall over to the opposite end of the maze from where the control room was, then took a sharp turn into a ninety-degree angle, right down to the floor. It took some squinting, but Jonathan could just about see a circular door at the end of the vertical piece of tube.

He pointed. “Is that how ya get people in there?”

“Well-observed, doctor,” Edward replied. “Yes, it is.”

Jonathan followed the horizontal piece of tube backwards, in their direction rather than out in the maze’s.

From the angle he was at, he couldn’t keep his gaze on the entire length of it, but he followed enough to be able to identify exactly where he and Edward would load their victims into the pipe to send them into the maze: there was a circular door in the corner of the room, easily missed when he’d walked in. It was the same kind of door as the one at the entrance to the maze.

Edward caught him staring and walked over to the door in their room, leaning down to press the purple button above it, which lit up after it was pushed. The circular door slid to the side to open the entrance to the pipe.

Jonathan hesitated, then slowly walked over to join Edward. He made a point to stop a short distance from the pipe, close enough to see inside but not enough for Edward to be able to push him in, and crouched to look inside.

There was an orb-shaped vessel inside, cushioned on the bottom with purple plush. It too had an opening, which Jonathan gathered would close when the main door did.

“Just stuff them in there,” Edward gestured with his cane, “and it shoots off down the pipe. The pod returns when it’s reached the end and deposited the mice, as it were.”

Jonathan wagered at least three adult humans could fit into the pod together, if they squeezed tight.

“Much less chance of escape than, say, an elevator. That comes later, when they’ve earned it.”

He gestured at the other end of the room, at the double doors that blended well into the wall; should a victim make it through the maze, the elevator would collect them and bring them

back to the Riddler so he could give his congratulations, then shoot them for so obviously cheating.

This had yet to happen, of course, because nobody was smart enough to win the Riddler's games.

Edward looked back at the pod. "Bit cramped, but we can't offer everything, not even comfort. Can we, doctor?" He looked down at Jonathan with a smile.

Jonathan looked up at him, then stood back up to his full height. He had five inches over Edward, not counting the hats.

"…I'll admit, Riddler," Jonathan said slowly, "I like the look of things."

"Oh, good," Edward replied, "I knew you would." He cocked his head lazily. "So! We'll go ahead with the initial idea then, hm? My *really good scheme."*

"Yes," Jonathan said with a small sigh. "My toxin c'n be put into yer labyrinth. We'll put some of the gas capsules at the entrance of the maze so they get a spritz before they head in." He reached for his belt and unclipped one of the skulls, holding it up for Edward to see. "I'll play with 'em, put in a motion sensor so they'll know when someone's walkin' by. Maybe we c'n link a few up to yer panel, too."

Edward nodded. "Good, good."

He turned and went back to the entrance of the control room.

"Well, I'll give you a day to make the preparations for your toxin, doctor. We'll meet back here, set things up, and then you and I can go and get our mice. Agreed?"

Jonathan squinted, then joined Edward in the elevator. He stood beside the Riddler, staring him down, as he nodded once.

"Agreed."

…

The preparations for the toxin were complete quicker than even Edward had anticipated; he was surprised when there came a knocking on the door to his base, captured on the hidden camera that passed its feed to the monitor.

Edward was at his desk, using a screwdriver to twist a screw into the side of the helmet device he'd left there before. His blazer hung on the back of his chair and the sleeves of his black shirt were rolled up. His fedora had been laid on the desk beside the helmet, though Edward elected to keep his eye mask on.

He looked up from his work at the monitor before him, saw a figure dressed in a uniform on the feed and tittered, then pressed a key on the keyboard to unlock the door.

The figure reached down beside them, and Edward watched as they lifted a large cardboard box. Its weight didn't seem to be as much of an inconvenience as its size, as the man didn't have trouble lifting it, but more so getting it to comfortably sit in his hands.

He opened the door and entered the elevator; Edward heard it rattle from where he sat, watching the doorway until the carriage came into view.

Jonathan stood within it, predictably, dressed in the brown uniform of one of the many delivery companies in Gotham. It strangely suited him, which was due either to Jonathan's lack of social standing or the fact he looked incredibly disgruntled to be there (Gotham's delivery men weren't known for their politeness).

Jonathan grunted and walked into the control room, then he and Edward locked gazes.

If he'd been expecting Edward to take the box from him, he was sorely mistaken; the Riddler was no one's lackey.

Jonathan set it down a little way's away from Edward, then stood up straight and adjusted the baseball cap on his head, stopping it from falling over his eyes.

Edward still didn't go to assist with the box. He did, however, stare down at Jonathan's knees, the bones of which seemed to jut from under his skin, and casually mentioned, "Nice knees."

Jonathan glanced down at his shorts, then grunted, uncaring for Edward's humour. His choice of clothing was for the disguise, not the enjoyment of showing off his limbs.

He took a ring of keys out of his pocket and used one key to cut through the tape keeping the box sealed. He pulled apart the flaps and stepped back to allow Edward to stand and peer into the box himself.

Within was a hefty collection of the skulls that Jonathan kept on the belt of his costume, each about the size of Edward's palm.

Edward let out a little, *"Oooh!"* and reached in to pluck one from the top, holding it up so he and the skull were face-to-face.

There came a clicking from behind the skull's eye sockets. Edward raised an eyebrow in amusement, staring the thing right in its empty sockets.

Jonathan put his hands to his hips as he said, "Motion-tracking, all of 'em. It's clicking cause it knows yer there, but it's not carryin' a capsule yet, so there's nothin' ta spray in yer face."

Edward hummed, lips curled in a cat-like smile. "Adorable."

He dropped the skull back into the box, wiped his hand on his shirt, then looked to Jonathan, who knew exactly what he was going to say.

“You aren’t ta touch ’em, Riddler,” Jonathan said automatically. “I’ll be the one ta place ‘em in the maze.”

“In *my* maze?” Edward said, putting a hand to his chest in fake outrage.

“My toxin, my rules.” Jonathan stooped to pick up the box, then narrowed his eyes at Edward as he stood back up and walked passed him. “You’d do it wrong.”

Edward frowned at him, pursing his lips as he watched Jonathan over his shoulder; the older man had gone to the second elevator, pressing the button on the wall while awkwardly balancing the box between his hand, knee and tummy.

“‘Wrong’?” Edward asked. “I do nothing *wrong,* doctor.”

Jonathan grunted.

The doors slid apart to reveal the white, circular room of the elevator, a better quality of technology than the rickety, old thing that had carried them down into the Riddler’s personal bunker.

Jonathan didn’t step in, however, but turned to Edward instead. “You, come with me.”

“Excuse me?” Edward replied. “I thought I wasn’t allowed.”

“Yer not allowed ta touch my toxin, but I don’t trust you to stand here and leave me unharmed. You come with me.”

Edward frowned tightly, spinning his cane in one hand before taking the curve in both. “I don’t take orders.”

“Fine. Then we’ll call this heist quits right here and now.”

Edward’s lip curled.

He couldn’t do that, not before he’d carried out his plan. To let Crane go free now would prove the entire thing pointless, and he couldn’t do that.

Edward’s gaze upon Crane darkened, and he stepped forward to join him.

“There we go,” Jonathan said as they both walked into the elevator. “That wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

Edward’s grip tightened around his cane, but he said nothing in response.

Edward was silent - a miracle, surely - as he accompanied Jonathan around the maze’s structure, watching him apply the skulls to the walls, where they would be in prime position to spray their contestants with toxin.

Jonathan went to his belt with each skull he attached to the wall, taking a vial of fear toxin to slip into the skulls’ mouths, then the men manoeuvred carefully around them to avoid being

sprayed themselves, as tempting as it was to grab one another and thrust them into a skull's gaze.

Luckily, they both managed to restrain themselves, and so they returned together to the control room after Edward assisted in helping Jonathan link the skulls at the entrance to a button on the panel via a small pressure device that replaced the motion sensors in the skulls' eyes, which automatically uncapped the vials of fear gas in the skulls' mouths.

Jonathan broke down and folded the empty box he'd kept his supplies in, tucking it under his arm.

"I could've gotten one of my henchmen to do that," Edward grumbled at last, irritable at having wasted time both following and leading Jonathan through his own labyrinth.

"Woulda done it wrong," was Jonathan's only reply, and Edward huffed in response.

The way Jonathan put it, nobody was capable of using his toxin correctly, only Jonathan himself. Edward would have liked an explanation of just how one could use it 'incorrectly' when all they had to do was clip a vial into a skull's mouth, but Jonathan had never provided one.

Edward stepped out of the elevator first, then gestured for Jonathan to follow as he walked over to his desk. There, he located a brown file and picked it up, holding it up for Jonathan to see.

"I've acquired the details of the mouse I wish to place in the labyrinth. I believe you may be familiar with them."

Edward held out the file and Jonathan reached to take it.

He flipped it open, thumbing to the profile Edward had made. Psychiatric records, copy of a birth certificate, photographs of the victim when they were a child, teenager and now an adult, and current residency, which Jonathan recognised as an apartment block in the south of Bleake Island.

"…Brendan Darcy," Jonathan read aloud, gaze flicking to Edward over the file's top. "He was one of mine, back in the asylum."

"Indeed he was." Edward twirled his cane.

"How did you know that?"

"I have my ways."

Jonathan narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but let it slide. It wasn't terribly incriminating information; he imagined it was actually fairly easy to find the patients he'd kept during his times as an Arkham Asylum psychiatrist.

"Well, what gripe do you have with 'im?" Jonathan asked.

Edward's face immediately creased up in a scowl. "He was my neighbour in Arkham, last I was there. He kept banging on our shared wall, keeping me up at night, and claiming that he would kill me and feed me to the mice. Ironic, huh? I understand he used to say the same to his doctors." He turned his nose up. "He thinks he can control mice, let's see if he can control his own instincts in the maze, eh?"

"He doesn't think he can control mice," Jonathan said, looking over the profile again.

Edward frowned. "Excuse me?"

"He doesn't think he can control mice. He fears them; deathly afraid of them." He looked to Edward. "Darcy is a paranoid schizophrenic, with a deadly case of musophobia due to trauma impacted upon him by abuse he suffered at the hands of his sister and her boyfriend. They would lock 'im in the basement, where mice would fester and bite him. He would take samples of cat food and feed it to 'em so that they wouldn't attack him. Sacrifices, if you will. Eventually, he did the same to the sister. The boyfriend's location is unknown."

Jonathan rolled his shoulder and looked back to the profile. "Nowadays, he suffers auditory hallucinations of mice squeaking in the walls around him and in everyday objects. He's under the belief that they've followed him throughout his life and - everywhere he goes - there's a cluster of mice ready to eat him, if he doesn't give them a sacrifice." He sniffed. "He ain't controllin' the imaginary mice, more persuading them."

He looked back to Edward, whose lips formed a perfect 'o' as he stared at Jonathan. "You ever been a sacrifice?"

Edward faltered, then smirked slowly. "Can't say I have."

"Hm. Well, you ain't gonna." Jonathan snapped the file closed and made his way toward the rickety elevator. "Darcy ain't particularly bright. He'll be dead within minutes in this maze o' yers."

Edward watched Jonathan step into the elevator, file now clutched under his arm. He was regarded with a rather deadpanned, bored look.

"You've given me an easy one, Mr. Nygma," Jonathan said. "While I'll still have fun, jus' know that my enjoyment will be strained."

Edward hummed, not particularly caring either way, then held up a finger to stop Jonathan from punching the button to make the elevator ascend. He sauntered gracefully over to him, standing just outside the carriage, and smiled in that same, sleazy car salesman kind of way.

"I want to come with you," he said easily.

Jonathan's expression didn't change. "Why?"

Edward cocked his head. "Because watching the little so-and-so squirm will be Step One of my revenge, of course. It will be exceedingly enjoyable to see him crying about the mice he threatened *me* with. Besides," Edward's smirking lips pursed and his eyes became half-

lidded, making his expression cheeky as he tilted his head the other way, “what an *honour* it would be to watch the Scarecrow in action, eh?”

Jonathan’s expression still didn’t change.

Edward chuckled through shut lips and leaned back, turning his nose up as he continued. “Oh, come on, doctor. Don’t be coy, now. You’re much like me: we enjoy having an audience to our genius because we know we *deserve* to be praised and witnessed. We feast on it, it makes us smile.” His smirk fell into a pout of thoughtful sympathy as he looked up at the ceiling in fake pondering. “But, then again, there’s a difference between us,” he looked to Jonathan out of the corner of his eye, smirking deviously again, *“my* genius has been *proven.”*

Jonathan’s expression remained the same; something about that bothered Edward, deep down, but he refused to show it on his own face. Just kept smirking that same smirk.

Jonathan’s expression still didn’t change, even as he began speaking, “I know what yer doing, Nygma. Yer tryin’ ta rile me up via my ego.”

“Is it working?” Edward asked.

“I don’t have an ego, Nygma. That sort of thing is for people like you; I have no time fer all that.” He cocked his head. “If you weren’t so distracted by *yer* own ego, you might have noticed that I never declined yer request to attend. Used ta riling people up to get what you want, are you, Nygma?”

Edward’s expression fell into a tight frown.

“Interestin’, fer someone who ain’t used ta rejection,” Jonathan said casually, then cocked his head. “You can accompany me on my visit to Brendan, but you do as I say and not as I do.”

Edward’s eyes narrowed, lips curling in a nasty scowl as he replied, “I told you, I don’t take orders.”

“Then you stay home.” Jonathan pressed the button to ascend. As the elevator’s gate slid shut, he added, “No skin off my nose.”

The elevator ascended, Jonathan disappeared from sight, and Edward was left with some thinking to do.

…

Brendan Darcy’s apartment was located in the Cauldron, over on Bleake Island. Like most of the apartments in Gotham, it was small and not very expensive, which was probably a good thing for an ex-inmate of Arkham Asylum, who had little money and even littler options. Understandably, Gothamites had little sympathy for the criminally insane - reformed or

otherwise - and so one could only take what was dropped in front of them, however small a portion.

All very little, in such a grand city.

It was with the assistance of Dr. Georgia Snow that Brendan was let out of Arkham, no longer riddled with hallucinations and able to carry out a conversation without the topic of rodents being mentioned. He'd been chatting to Dr. Snow like she was an old friend two weeks before his release, and he'd been sleeping without nightmares or threatening his neighbour; it was considered enough to trust him on his own, outside of Arkham's walls.

He had to report to a parole officer every two weeks to ensure he was keeping with his progress, but - aside from that - he was a free man, for the first time in nearly two decades.

Brendan had learned things about himself, in the short time he'd had outside of the asylum walls. He enjoyed listening to the birds sing in the morning; he liked the feeling of freshly-washed sheets on his skin, the opposite of the cold cloth of Arkham's beds; he looked rather snazzy in a waistcoat and tie ensemble; he'd gotten into collecting stamps and had them all stuck inside an album he'd bought with his own money, earned from the paper boy job he'd managed to get for himself; he hated watching the news and night time was no longer scary and freshly-baked bread was the most intoxicating smell in the room and - you know what, he actually *liked* those daytime talk shows.

Things were so much better when one was sane; life was so much easier when one was sane. The delusions didn't cloud his thoughts, the musophobia didn't rule his life, he wasn't scared of being alone in a room anymore or of forming relationships with others, since there were no mice to threaten them.

There were no mice. They didn't exist. They had never existed.

There were no mice, there were no mice, there were no mice…there are no mice. Everything is fine, everything is stable, everything is right.

I am safe.

He was safe and sound in his apartment in The Cauldron, safe and sound and currently stepping out of the bathroom after a calming shower, dressed in his nice, new clothes and running a towel over his minimal brown hair, shaved right near the scalp.

That was another thing he found he enjoyed: being able to take hot showers on his own. The showers in Arkham were shared - split between the sexes, of course - and one had to get up pretty damn early if they wanted any semblance of heat from those pipes. Too bad Shower Time was scheduled during the afternoons.

Now, he could shower whenever he wanted! At any temperature! And nobody was around to make fun or take up space or pull jokes about dropping the soap -

A creak of wood cut Brendan from his thoughts and he froze, gaze darting over to where he swore the sound had come from: over by the window, which was partially open, making the

curtains give little jerked sways.

Brendan's brow furrowed. He didn't remember opening the window in the living room. The bathroom's had been opened to let the steam from the shower out, lest it fog the windows and mirror, but the living room's had been left alone.

In response, Brendan felt his heart rate begin to rise, but he swallowed back the panic and left the towel to hang around his shoulders as he walked over to the open window, feeling cool air as he approached.

The wooden board that had creaked earlier did it again under Brendan's own weight, which only made him more scared since that confirmed something had stepped upon it. Something with a similar weight to his own.

Brendan shut the window, then turned to survey his room. He saw none of his belongings out of place or any figures, so he dared to begin to believe he really might've imagined it.

His instincts betrayed him in the moment, however, for he looked from shadow to shadow to try and find the slitted pair of white eyes or the faint outline of a cape.

Corner to corner, sofa to armchair to coffee table to TV, floor to ceiling - it might've seemed silly to look for an apparently human intruder on the *ceiling,* of all places, but Brendan had been an inmate of Arkham Asylum. He knew better than to doubt that that could be used as a hiding place - and it hadn't been the patients there that had taught him that, but the person who had put him in the asylum itself.

Another creak sounded, this one from behind the armchair, and Brendon whipped his head around to look at it.

Heart pounding in his ears, he sped over to check it, only to find empty space.

Inhaling through his teeth, Brendan stepped backwards, frantically looking around the room again.

"Leave me alone, Batman!" Brendan exclaimed into the tense atmosphere of his apartment's living room. "I haven't done anything, I swear!"

There came no swish of the cape, no sudden figure towering over him, no slitted eyes in the shadows or gravelly voice telling him it was time to go back to Arkham, and where that should've comforted Brendan, it only served to frighten him more.

Where was Batman now? He couldn't see him, he couldn't hear him, he couldn't even smell him -

Another noise broke into the scene, like a needle puncturing skin and depositing acid: squeaking. Mice squeaking.

Brendan's eyes widened so much they hurt as he looked toward the couch, where the squeaking seemed to originate from. His heart pounded in his chest - he didn't want to go

anywhere near that furniture, he wanted nothing to do with the mice anymore, he wanted nothing to do with anything he'd done in the past.

But that was the problem: it was *his* past, and it was what put him into this situation, where he was hated by the general public, where the squeaking of mice was his trigger, and where he had to report to a parole officer every two weeks - a parole officer who would've loved to hear about his hallucinations coming back.

He just had to ignore them.

Don't encourage your delusions, Dr. Snow had said, *that will only make them worse.*

He just had to ignore them, he just had to ignore them, he just had to ignore them…

The squeaking intensified, as it always did when the mice were getting angry - *nooo, they're not real!*

Brendan shut his eyes and shoved his palms over his ears, pressing hard on either side of his head, so hard his skull threatened to squash between them like a grape. He could deal with the pain of the squeezing and the heat under his palms, but he couldn't deal with *them.* Not after so long, not after finally getting healthy again - never again!

Please, don't do this, Brendan begged to the universe, *please, don't do this to me. I was good, I'm being good, I don't want this. I don't want this! I was doing so well, I promised I wouldn't…Please, don't do this. Please, please, please.*

Rationalise it, Brendan, he heard Dr. Snow say in his ear. *There's got to be an explanation for what you're hearing.*

Brendan opened one eye, looking toward the couch contemplatively.

Dr. Snow had said they weren't real, he believed her, she'd proved herself right…but…but what if they weren't *his* mice, the ones that didn't exist? What if these ones…*did* exist, but they weren't the ones that had frightened him all these years?

This apartment building was old, would it have been too great a stretch to assume there really *were* mice in his apartment? Who knows how long the furniture had been there, Brendan hadn't bought it. Maybe they'd…made a home in there. Maybe he had an infestation.

A totally normal, real infestation, with real mice that gave real squeaks.

He just had to prove this was it.

It took him several seconds to calm himself just the fraction he needed to get his legs moving; his foot was pressed forward tentatively, the wood creaking beneath it as pressure built. The other foot came next, then another step was taken and another and another until Brendan was slowly walking to the couch.

He alternated between watching his feet move and watching the sofa, focusing on his movement then looking for mice, urging one to crawl out from a cushion so he would have proof that this was real. He made himself stop when he realised how similar that mindset was to his old one, and just focused on getting over to the couch instead.

When he reached the couch's side, Brendan swallowed thickly, stopped to practise a breathing exercise in which he inhaled through his nose and out through his mouth, then he leaned forward and raised a shaking hand to the centre cushion of the three that made the couch's back.

He hovered over it, skin barely brushing the leather, then he grasped it and slowly pulled to try and view behind it.

No mice there, but unmistakable squeaking.

The same, the same, the same old squeaking, just like back then. The same that had plagued the walls and the floor and the furniture and every aspect of his life -

"No!" Brendan cried out, furiously ripping the cushion from the couch.

He threw it to the floor, then grabbed for the pair left behind and threw them away too, then punched at the cushions that made up the seat.

"No! No, no, *no!* It's just an infestation! They're not back, they can't be! They can't be! I'm cured!" He tossed his head back and screamed to the ceiling, "You hear me, *Batman?! I'm cured! I'm cured! I'm good now!* You can't come for me, I've done nothing wrong!" He slapped his hands to his temples and clawed at his scalp. "I'm good now! I'm good, I'm good! Claire, I've been good, you don't have to lock me - *BATMAN! Batman, you don't have to lock me up!* I'm good now!"

He panted hard, chest aching as his breath left him in short bursts. His brain felt heavy in his skull and he wanted nothing more than to slam his head against the wall, shatter the bone and reach in to scramble his brain and take the weight off of it.

"It's just an infestation," Brendan whispered to himself, convincing himself rather than Batman or his sister. "It's just an infestation…There's nothing to fear, nothing to fear…It's an infestation, I have to go talk to -"

He spun around to go to the door, only to come face-to-collarbone with a scarecrow.

Brendan gasped and scrambled backwards out of instinct, only to be sprayed in the face with something green, and he went coughing and spluttering backwards, waving his hands in the air to try and get the gas to dissipate and shutting his eyes as the gas burned them.

When he opened them, the scarecrow was gone, but the couch was wiggling.

Brendan watched, horrified, as the couch shifted and slid across the floor with the force of its wiggling, and the squeaking in Brendan's ears grew louder and louder until the seams burst

and mice came spilling out in droves, sprinting together in an endless pack as they circled Brendan's coffee table, then came running at him.

Brendan screamed, arms coming up to defend himself as he lost balance and went tumbling to the floor, covering his head with his arms as squeaking enveloped his hearing, and the mice came circling around him, creating a whirlwind of rodents all squeaking and biting at him, their teeth pinching and cutting into him.

His lungs burned with how quickly his breathing picked up, coming out hard and fast, dragging the oxygen from his brain and making it ache.

"Brendaaannn…" The collective, high-pitched voices came to him over the ongoing squeaking. *"Brendaaannnn…"*

"NO!" Brendan screamed, yelping every time the mice's teeth drug into him. *"PLEASE, NO!"*

"Brendaaannnnn…We missed you, Brendan, we missed yoooouuuu…"

"NO!"

"We're hungry, Brendaaannn…We need fooood…SSSSSacrificcccessss…"

"NO! NO, I - I CAN'T GIVE YOU ANYMORE! THAT'S BAD AND -" He squeezed his eyes shut, so tight they hurt, and dug his fingernails into his scalp just as painfully. "I'M NOT BAD ANYMORE! I'M BETTER NOW! AND YOU'RE - YOU'RE NOT *REAL!"*

"Brendaaaannnnnn…"

"YOU CAN'T BE REAL! YOU'VE NEVER BEEN - YOU'RE NOT THE ONES -"

"SSSSaaaaaacrificeeesssss…"

"NO! NO! NO!!"

"SSSSooooo hungryyyyyy…"

The bites stung and his head ached and his brain felt like it was rotting and falling apart and his lungs burned and his cheeks were cold and wet with tears -

"YOU'RE NOT REAL!" Brendan screamed at the top of his lungs as he threw himself upwards, off of the floor and to his feet.

He sprinted out of the swarm, feeling no rats beneath his feet but uncaring if he squashed any, and charged over to the door of his apartment, slamming his body against it in his hurry to get out. He wrestled with the doorknob, sweaty and shaking hands slipping on it, his heart pounding in his ears as the brass handle refused to turn, then claws were digging into his shoulders and forcefully spinning him around to face the human-sized mouse that was snarling in his face.

Drool dripped from its sharp teeth as its beady, red eyes glared into Brendan's own terrified face. Its dark fur stood up in spikes on its body, whiskers threatening to cut Brendan where he stood. It was blurry around the edges, pulsing and wobbling, like it was something of another reality and was struggling to stay within this one, like Brendan was its anchor.

"Brendaaannnn…" Its voice was so much deeper than the others, a demonic boom that stabbed and scraped at Brendan's ears and only made him cringe. *"Brendaaaannn… Saaaaaacrificesss…"*

"NO! NO MORE! I'M BEGGING YOU, PLEASE -"

"Feed meeee…Feed ussss…"

"Feed us, Brendannnn," the hoard of mice chimed in as they ran rings around the large mouse. *"Feeeeeeed usssssss…"*

"NO!! PLEASE, NO!!"

The mouse let out a gurgling sort of growl from deep within it throat and dug its claws even harder into his shoulders. It tore him from the door and threw him to the floor, letting him crumple in a heap before it stood over him, claws clicking against each other as it prepared them for attack.

Brendan screamed, trying to scramble away, blocked by the ring of running rodents that came to circle him. He was forced to stay in place, forced to watch as the mouse reared back, letting out a shriek that shook the apartment, then slammed its paw down onto Brendan's face, covering his nose and mouth as he stared and shook in terror and felt the oxygen leave his lungs and rendering the world black.

Brendan's eyes rolled into the back of his head, then his eyelids finally slid shut.

The apartment was rendered silent for a few seconds, then Jonathan Crane called out, "It's over. You can come out now."

The window slid open, and Edward Nygma poked his head into view. He stood up from his place upon the fire escape, sliding his leg through the window and climbing into Brendan Darcy's apartment.

"Well," Edward said, his voice slightly muffled by the half gas mask he wore over his nose and mouth, "that was quite a doozy."

Jonathan straightened, taking the chloroform-soaked rag from where he'd pressed it and held it down over Brendan's mouth and nose. He flicked the rag in the air, then stuffed it into his coat pocket.

"Ready for departure," Jonathan said casually, staring down at Brendan's unconscious form with disinterest.

Edward stepped up to stand by Jonathan's side, staring down at their victim as well.

After what he'd had to endure from the bastard during their shared time in Arkham, he couldn't help but smirk upon seeing him laying there, nothing but a sick man with everything to lose.

"…Nicely done, doctor," he said after a moment, looking to Jonathan.
"I'm *almost* impressed."

Jonathan frowned at him out of the corner of his eye, then stalked over to the sofa and reached between the cushions and pulled out the recorder that had played the squeaking of rodents not too long ago. He shoved that into his pocket.

"Quick on your feet, aren't you?" Edward asked cheekily, swinging his cane casually from side to side like he was practising a one-handed game of golf.

"Hm?" Jonathan looked over at him.

"When you were crawling around." Edward gestured at Jonathan's paths with his cane. "When he thought you were Batman."

Jonathan followed the imaginary line with his gaze, then looked back to Edward. "That wasn't me."

Edward blinked.

He had thought it was rather inhumane, the way Crane had been scrambling around on all fours; he looked something like a spider, so agile and coordinated that Brendan Darcy hadn't even known he was behind him, below him, all around him the entire time. Edward could understand the fact that Brendan had mistaken Scarecrow for Batman; one would think only the Bat could move like that.

Edward tipped his head up, brow furrowed and lips pursed beneath his mask. "Didn't stick around to say hello, then?"

"Scarecrow isn't one fer pleasantries." Jonathan turned away to stand over Brendan again, bending at the waist to observe his expression. "He does the job, then he leaves."

"Hm. Anti-social."

"That, an' he doesn't particularly give a damn about ya."

Edward pursed his lips. "Charming."

The men jumped a foot in the air each when a loud bang erupted against the door, shaking the structure and making the doorknob rattle. They both spun around to look at it, watching as it shook with each smack that was laid upon the other side of it.

"What the *hell's* goin' on in there, fruitcake?!" screamed the man behind the door. "When I said I'd let ya move in here, I didn't mean you could just go screamin' and runnin' around in the dead o' night! Open the fuck up!" He slammed against the door again. "Open up, now!"

Jonathan turned from the door and stooped down to slide his hands under Brendan's armpits, lifting his upper body from the floor and dragging him toward the open window. He grunted with the effort, despite having dragged bodies before, and looked over at Edward, who was casually following.

"Gimme a hand," Jonathan ordered in a whisper.

Edward looked back at him and lifted an eyebrow. "I don't do heavy-lifting."

"What?"

"I don't do heavy-lifting. Or lifting of any kind. That's what henchmen are for." He sent him that same sleazy smirk; even if the smirk itself couldn't be seen, Edward knew Jonathan would see it in his eyes. "If you've neglected to hire any, that isn't my fault. *I* didn't bring any because - as I understand it - I don't really have a role in this mission -"

"Open up, fruitcake!" the landlord called again.

"- as I am simply an audience. Right, doctor?"

Jonathan gritted his teeth. He hated how smug Edward looked, especially while wearing one of his gas masks.

"I told you," Jonathan said with a growl, "ta do as I say an' not as I do."

"And I told *you,"* Edward retorted, "that I don't take orders. Twice."

"Fruitcake!" the landlord shouted, slamming another fist against the door.

"We'd best be going." Edward casually swung his cane like a metronome as he sauntered over to the open window, beginning to clamber out as he said, "Be quick, doctor."

Jonathan watched him disappear out the window and back onto the fire escape, then huffed and reached for Brendan again.

As he dragged his victim, Jonathan muttered, "Be patient, old friend…Be very *patient…"*

…

Edward proceeded to watch Jonathan - and, at certain points, Scarecrow - kidnap six more victims.

All of them were plucked from the alleyways of Gotham, wherein Edward found a hiding place to watch the attacks occur.

From his understanding, Jonathan allowed Scarecrow to do the initial sneaking after the victims were selected; he would be the one to situate himself at one end of the alleyway, use the various dumpsters and abandoned cardboard boxes (or, in the case of a particularly skinny alleyway, hold himself over his victim via pressing his hands and feet to the walls) to hide himself and to make noise to alert their target of somebody's presence.

It was a wonder if these people thought similar to Brendan, that Batman was paying them a visit, and it was a wonder if they viewed this as a good or bad thing. Batman had been viewed as a menace before the Zero Year, wherein his heroics were enough not only to save Gotham from Edward's reign, but to gain the trust of the GCPD.

From there, Batman had proved himself useful during the rise of the other few Rogues, to the point that they were hardly considered Gotham's Rogue Gallery, but more Batman's. Himself, Penguin, Joker, this 'Mad Hatter' that had popped up in yesterday's newspaper and of course, the Scarecrow - they all belonged to Batman now, try as the GCPD might.

This was just becoming Batman's playground - the question was: did the people of Gotham still consider him the bully or had they changed his status to the popular kid?

Edward didn't get a proper answer from watching the Gothamites' reactions to Scarecrow's advances; in any case, he was more interested in watching how Crane's toxin affected them once they got a dose, sometimes in the form of gas, sometimes in its liquid form.

From what Edward understood, it seemed to always be Crane to deliver the toxin while Scarecrow was the method to get to them without being seen. Split personalities didn't make a person stronger or faster, theoretically, but it did change a thought process and apply different skills to the body, depending on the personalities' individual knowledge.

Where Jonathan would be clumsy enough to perhaps trip over the lid laying by the garbage can, Scarecrow would roll said lid down the alleyway to create a disturbance in his favour or be vigilant enough to avoid the thing altogether.

Where Jonathan knew the ins and outs of the toxin and how much to use, Scarecrow seemed rather oblivious to the science of it all and favoured the general scaring rather than the accomplishment of such a drug's making.

The incident between them in Arkham revealed to Edward that Scarecrow did indeed watch the goings-on in Jonathan's life, so while both personalities had a part to play in gathering their mice, they both got to reap the rewards, even if only Jonathan got to stand over the terrified, writhing human and grin savagely at their fright.

An interesting comparison, Edward thought in hindsight, but not one overall related to his plans. He didn't care for Scarecrow; he hadn't been the one to have him sedated back in Arkham.

Jonathan's choice of disguise earlier meant they had transportation for their victims; perhaps it was a bit strange to see a delivery truck roaming around in the dead of night, but either people figured there were criminals transporting their goods and made the wise decision to

stay out of it lest they get killed, or people remembered that there was weirder crap in Gotham than a delivery truck appearing at night, and shrugged it off.

If they had bothered to look, they might've noticed the man-sized scarecrow and the silly man in the sillier green hat.

Edward continued to be most unhelpful in getting their victims into his base, walking merrily along and encouraging Jonathan to hurry up as he watched him drag person after person into the elevator.

As outraged as he was, Jonathan did barely more than grumble and glare at the other man out of the corner of his eye, reminding himself that he needed only to put up with the Riddler until the experiment was done, then he could gas the little fucker and get out of there.

Then he'd never have to see the Riddler again. There would be no more heists between them, despite whatever opportunities for experiments Edward would offer.

Of course, it was Jonathan who had the task of stuffing their victims into the pod to be carried down the pipe and into the maze, in two groups of three and one of two. He watched the capsule shoot off with the slumbering, crumpled humans inside, almost finding some amusement in how they tumbled out of the pod once it reached its destination at the other end of the maze, the plush bottom tilting to make its passengers roll out.

The two men came to stand together at the control panel, looking out at their victims as they laid in heaps on the ground, completely unaware of their locations and their fates.

"How long until they wake up?" Edward asked, eyes half-lidded as he observed them.

"Anywhere from ten to twenty minutes," Jonathan replied, "depending on the person."

"Hm. Then we have some time."

Edward stepped away from him, removing his fedora and gas mask. He wandered over to the desk in the corner and placed both items on top, then eyed the football helmet-made device from earlier. He narrowed his eyes at it, then spoke to Crane without looking at him.

"So," he said, "what are you hoping from this experiment?"

"I'm not hopin' fer anything," Jonathan replied, watching the unconscious lot at the other end of the maze, squinting to see them properly. "That's the beauty of the experiment."

"I thought the beauty of an experiment was to prove one's hypothesis. You're going in blind?"

"Not blind. I have my own theories for each one of the contestants," he raised a gloved hand and placed it upon the glass in front of him, "based on what I saw collecting them. If they'll partner with fight or flight, if their phobia will simply make them fall to the ground in despair, if they'll be coherent enough to escape the maze. It's different fer each person, as is the way with fear, but even then there's only a few options one could take. Do they embrace

their fear? Do they run from it? Do they face it? It doesn't matter, in the end, for we all have to succumb eventually; fear really is jus' the higher being here."

He tapped the glass with his index finger in a steady rhythm.

Edward blinked, then looked over his shoulder. "You really like fear, then."

"I didn't base my career around it outta spite."

"An odd obsession to have, if you'll pardon my saying so."

"One would say the same about riddles."

"No, they wouldn't. Riddles provide a challenge, and everybody loves a challenge. They exercise the brain. One could spend their entire lives keeping their body fit and healthy, but if the brain is useless then what's the point?"

"Fear is nature's challenge."

Edward chuckled. "Is it really?"

Jonathan's gaze flicked to the corner of his eye, looking in Edward's direction but not quite seeing him, then he said aloud, "Fear dictates everythin', Mr. Nygma. Most people aren't aware they're scared in the moment, but the hindsight brings with it the most valuable of discoveries. You tie yer shoelaces cause yer afraid ta fall. You shut the curtains to keep out the world and anyone who may threaten yer sanctuary. You check the time because yer afraid ta lose it. You go about yer life thinkin' yer calm an' collected, but fear won't let you. It follows you everywhere because it is the first thing we ever feel, taken from the safety of the mother's womb. It is the friend who is never lost to us, an' the enemy that never stops the hunt.

"There are base fears and there are grown fears. We marry because we're afraid to die alone. The datin' and the courtin' bring us fractions of happiness, but the company in death is the endgame. We have children because we're afraid of dying without leaving something of significance behind. We can make all the scientific discoveries we want and even they will be lost in the void of ignorance, they won't preserve our names like children will. They'll go on an' have their own lives, carrying our names and our blood and our facial features, then they'll go on and have their kids and their kids will have kids and so on. You'll be gone, but they will tell fond stories of you to keep you alive. Children are a must, y'see. Pets are a bit of both: we get them cause we fear loneliness, but also because they provide something to control. We fear being the world's punchin' bag, so we enjoy having something we can tell to sit an' stay.

"Grown fears are the ones where people differ. They're the traumas people have picked up along the way, trying to walk the path that is life, so they are unique to the person. Brendon Darcy may find another who fears mice like him, but they would never know the trauma of bein' locked in a basement and chewed at by the rodents he would let rule his life. People c'n hide away from these fears, they can face 'em, they can use 'em as excuses or embrace 'em. They may even claim to be cured of 'em. But, in the end, fear will always be lurking. It will

always make them nervous of their old phobia, always make them anxious of the phobia returnin'. So they can claim to be cured, but fear will always claim *them.*

"Fear was the first thing we felt in our lives and it will be the last. No one is truly fearless, only ignorant. But their ignorance subsides when fear takes over. Fear can reward you, control you, dictate you or even embrace you back. Fear is power, Mr. Nygma, and that is why I like it."

Edward stared at Jonathan in silence. Any sort of mockery or teasing he might've given for the dramatic tone of the speech was erased when he chose instead to focus on another aspect of Jonathan's tone: the passion.

Edward hadn't heard anybody speak with that much passion in…ever.

Waterbury, Connecticut wasn't just Hell to Edward, but it was the land where boredom and stupidity reigned. Nobody there had aspirations: his father had been a mechanic who did the job just because that was what he was good at, the *only* thing he was good at; his mother had worked as a librarian because she desired for quiet, but even that was short-term and pointless; his classmates couldn't answer the question 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' because none of them had put any thought into it nor had any hobbies they wanted to morph into careers, just mooched off their parents and spent their days carefree, playing football and bullying Edward.

Edward had had aspirations and ambitions; he'd gotten the hell out of there the second he could, and not just as an escape from his parents. He'd made his own money, gotten his own jobs, climbed to the top until he'd been the one to rule over Gotham, using *his* own intelligence and *his* own passion - if only for a little while.

Dr. Crane had his passion, and his intelligence. He'd used them to get his achievements, his careers, to make a name for himself in the public eye and in the criminal underworld.

Passion only got one so far, Edward had always said; combine it with intelligence and one could go the full way. But in a city like Gotham, which was just like Waterbury, Connecticut with its boredom and its simplicity and its morons, passion was so *refreshing.* Edward hadn't thought he'd hear something quite like it again, and coming from a fellow - but lesser - intellect, no less…

Morons with passion were still morons; intellects with passion were the ones to listen to. They ruled the world; Edward had ruled it once before a fellow like he and Jonathan had taken it away and now held it in his palm. But he could take it again, and Jonathan had a fair chance…

Edward looked down at his feet, pondering with a frown. He looked to the helmet, over his shoulder at Jonathan, then back to his feet.

Crane - damn him. He actually almost made Edward reconsider -

But no. He wasn't going to stand down now, not when he'd gotten so far.

But then…maybe he could…

Edward pursed his lips, then looked over at Jonathan with an easy smile. “Fascinating. Truly. Are you afraid now, doctor?”

“Why would I be?” Jonathan asked.

“Well, you’re in a room underground with a man who was once a dictator, who fed his people to beasts without thinking much of it. I’ve killed people -”

“As have I,” Jonathan said in interruption.

“So we have two known murderers, in a room underground. Both know how to get out, both know how to get in, but only one knows its secrets. What does become of these two murderers?” Edward narrowed his eyes with a smirk and raised a finger. “Riddle me *that.”*

Jonathan turned his head and stared at him in silence; Edward could sense the tension in his shoulders, the urge to grab for his scythe to make sure Edward stayed away from him, a temptation in his mind.

Too bad he hadn’t brought it along; obviously thought he hadn’t needed it just to snatch up Gothamites and stick them in a maze. There was a sickle dangling on the back of his belt, but who knew if he could reach back and unclip it in time, should Edward try anything.

His own greed had blinded him to proper preparations. Bless.

Edward laughed. “I’m joking with you, doctor! Joking! I promise.” He showed him his palms, fingers splayed.

Jonathan grunted and turned to look at their captives again. One or two had started to stir.

Edward looked down at the helmet again, brow furrowed and lips pursed, then he grunted, reached for it and a screwdriver, and got to work. As he carried out his task, he continuously looked over his shoulder at Jonathan, was relieved to see him still watching their captives, then continued with his mission.

When he was finished, he sighed silently, then turned back to Jonathan and snuck a hand behind his back to pick up the helmet on the desk, resisting a grunt at the strain of the weight. He held it behind his back as he walked casually to Jonathan, putting his other hand back there to feign a regal position.

“You’re still tense. You need to relax, doctor,” Edward said, “we’re partners, for the time being. I may not treat my partners as equals - because, well, none of you are equal to my genius - but that doesn’t mean I’ll kill them at a moment’s notice. Really.”

Edward stopped by Jonathan’s side, smiling at him.

“Ergo, you should try to relax.”

In two quick movements, Edward snatched Jonathan's tall hat from his head and - just as Jonathan flinched and whipped around to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing - he slammed the helmet down upon Jonathan's head.

Jonathan grunted in pain, stumbling forward at the sudden weight on his skull. He grabbed at the helmet and tried to yank it off, but the light buzz in his ear - the classic noise for an error - made it clear to him that only Edward could remove it. Either fingerprints or specific finger placement, Jonathan theorised.

He frantically turned to Edward, who had tossed his hat away and begun a merry stroll over to the track in the corner.

Jonathan quickly followed.

"Riddler!" Jonathan shouted, one hand going behind him to shove his coat aside and attempt to collect his sickle, glaring at the back of Edward's head as the Riddler crouched to collect something from the floor. "Get this damn thing off -"

Edward whipped around and grabbed Jonathan's arm, slapping one cuff over the wrist and clicking it shut.

Jonathan spluttered and lifted his other hand, bringing with it his sickle that sliced through the air and toward Edward's head, but Edward leapt to the side to avoid it, still holding Jonathan's arm, and reached out to snatch up his other arm.

Jonathan fought back, trying to bring the blade down upon Edward's arm, but Edward fought against him and tried pulling Jonathan's arm closer to the other one, elbow digging into Jonathan's collarbone.

They were stuck in a stalemate, Jonathan's sickle shaking between them as the arm was locked in place. Both men kicked at each other's legs, causing the two to wobble awkwardly and have to snatch support from each other. They were stopped from dancing all over the control room only by the wire linking Jonathan's wrist to the contraption stuck in the track on the floor; the cuff dug painfully into Jonathan's skin once or twice when Edward made him lose balance, but he ignored it in favour of shouting at the Riddler to get off of him and kicking at Edward's shins.

Finally, to bring this pathetic display to an end, Edward managed to accidentally deliver a kick that made his heel clip Jonathan's groin, to which Jonathan let out a noise caught between a yelp and a hiss, and Edward gained the upper hand during the distraction.

He slapped the other cuff down upon Jonathan's second wrist and took the liberty to snatch his sickle from his loosened grip.

Jonathan fought, tried to wiggle his hands free, but his attempts were futile. He scowled from under his masks at the Riddler, who now clutched his sickle in one hand.

"Release me," Jonathan ordered with a growl. *"Now."*

Edward reached into the inner pocket of his blazer, from which he retrieved a small remote.

“I don’t take *orders,* doctor,” Edward said, then pointed the remote over his shoulder at the device connected to the track on the floor. He clicked the button.

A green light erupted from the forehead of Jonathan’s helmet, shining down on the floor in front of him, and the device he was linked to began to slide along the track.

Jonathan was pulled along, giving a grunt as he was tugged forward and forced to walk quickly in a hunched position, the wire connecting his handcuffs to the device not being long enough to accommodate his height. He had a feeling that had been the point; it didn’t seem to accommodate anybody’s height.

It didn’t escape his notice that his feet were soon matching up with the footprints painted on the floor.

“Riddler!” Jonathan shouted, trying to look at Edward over his shoulder as he walked around a corner of the track. It was difficult to, when the helmet was so heavy, he could barely even lift his head. “What is this?!”

“I’d be careful with how I position my head, if I were you,” Edward said, turning Jonathan’s sickle over in his hand. “If that light on your head catches anything, the bomb inside your helmet will detonate, and I’ll be having to clean your dull, dull brain off of my walls.”

Jonathan’s eyes widened.

Riddler couldn’t be serious; if a bomb exploded in this small room, then Edward would be going along with it. He was far too much of a narcissist to throw his life away like that. Hell, even if he didn’t die, it would destroy his equipment, the files and controls he had slaved over for God knows how long. Surely, he wouldn’t risk that.

Surely, he wouldn’t risk anything in this environment. It was too dangerous, they were *underground,* for God’s sake! Even if Edward survived, even if his equipment was fine, who knew what the explosion would do to the structure of the place? Neither of them won in this situation, for fuck’s sake!

“You wouldn’t,” Jonathan said as he made it around the track once. “Ya wouldn’t gain anythin’.”

“You would be dead, so I would gain exactly what I wanted.” Edward ventured to his desk to collect his cane and fedora. He placed Jonathan’s sickle down upon it once he’d put his hat on. “I *always* get what I want, Dr. Crane.”

Jonathan’s eyes narrowed at the back of Edward’s head before he was forced to turn his back on him. “I *knew* you’d be doin’ somethin’. I *knew* ya weren’t ta be trusted, goddamn it.”

“And you let yourself get too cosy, didn’t you?” Edward spun around, a disgusted little scowl on his face. “I *ruled Gotham,* Dr. Crane! I am hardly one to drop the suspicions of. But, bless, you let your guard down.” He scoffed. “I am also *vengeful…”*

Jonathan frowned confusedly. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

“You know what I’m talking about! This is revenge, Dr. Crane, for your attempts at *humiliation.* For your sad excuse of a punishment. I don’t take it lightly when one thinks he has superiority over me.” He scoffed out a laugh. “I am the *Riddler! Nobody* is superior to *me!* I am Gotham’s greatest genius, the only hope it has in this sad, sad world! I will *not* have some poor excuse of a *doctor* try and pull me down from my throne! You understand me?!”

Jonathan spluttered nonsense, even more confused than before. *“No!”*

Edward growled in frustration. “You, ordering me to be sedated just because I sussed out that your accent was fake! Just because *I* knew that you were afraid of judgement! I don’t like where *I’m* from, Dr. Crane?” Edward scoffed. “You *hypocrite.”*

Jonathan’s brow furrowed.

He remembered his days of faking his accent. Nobody had been able to tell the difference, he hadn’t switched back to the Southern one until he’d taken on the moniker of the Scarecrow. Only his second personality had known he wasn’t really an Englishman, and he hadn’t been happy about it at all.

“What the hell’re you talkin’ about, boy?!” Jonathan exclaimed.

“Don’t try and deny it, doctor!” Edward snapped, jabbing a finger at him. “You know what you did!”

“No! I don’t!”

Edward faltered, finger lowering but not dropping. “What…What do you mean? You’re lying, you must be!”

Jonathan huffed. “I dunno *what* yer talkin’ about, Riddler! Fer once, make a damn lick o’ *sense!* I don’t remember doin’ anything like that! Not to *you!”*

It was Edward’s turn to splutter nonsense.

His face paled considerably, scowl dropping. Angry confusion laced his features, morphing his expression like messy clay, then he shrieked, “What *do you mean* you *‘don’t remember’?!”*

And now it was Jonathan’s turn to scoff.

“You think I remember every damn patient that walked through them doors, boy?!” Jonathan shouted, going another lap around the track. “I only remember the patients I personally worked with! You? Why the hell would I remember you?!”

Edward’s lips fell, then he snapped, “I’m the *Riddler!* Why *wouldn’t you* remember me?!”

“Cause I didn’t *treat you!”* Jonathan roared. He sighed, then confessed, “Only thing I remember of you bein’ in Arkham is that I *wanted* ta be yer doctor, but Jeremiah said *no!”*

Edward faltered again. “You did? *He* did?”

“Yeah! But Jeremiah - the man with all the *‘good’* decisions - said *no!* That was all she wrote!”

Edward stared in silence.

He’d wanted Jonathan to grovel before him, to beg to be let go, to say he was sorry he ever treated the Riddler so poorly. This wasn’t at all what he expected; how could Jonathan *forget* about bullying him? *Him!*

Edward frowned.

Then again, from Jonathan’s earlier comment, it’d sounded like he’d done similar things to his actual patients. Edward was aware he’d once experimented on them all with early batches of fear toxin, he’d read about it soon after escaping Arkham. Clearly, Jonathan’s memory of having Edward sedated had gotten lost amongst the memories of sticking needles into *other* people’s skin.

Ugh. Edward, being forgotten while those nobodies were remembered.

Ugh!

“Well…” Edward started, trying to think quickly. “Well…you still did it, doctor! You… *bullied me!* Humiliated me! And I will not allow that to go unpunished!” He straightened his spine, fixed his tie, then put both hands on his cane as he collected himself. “How should I punish you, doctor? Perhaps I should make you watch as I carry out *your* experiment, then leave you here to rot when I’m done. I don’t come down here as often as you’d think. Maybe next time I come here, you’ll be nothing but bones on the floor, still being tugged around the track. Perhaps I should detonate that bomb on your head. I’ll have to deal with clean-up afterwards, but, eh, I’ll have my henchmen do it.”

“You can’t be serious, Riddler,” Jonathan said, trying to peer at him as he walked around.

As much as he wanted to believe Edward wouldn’t really do it, as much as he wanted to appear to him like he wasn’t afraid, he could feel the hair on his arms stand on end, his heartbeat quickening.

“Yer’ll go with it! Or your equipment will!”

“Pah. I’ll be out of here before I suffer; the bomb is programmed to give me a few seconds to get out of the splash zone. I’ll be in the elevator by the time it goes off, being pulled up to safety.”

“An’ you’ll take yer stuff with you?!”

“I can replace it, doctor.” Edward smiled sweetly and cocked his head. “I’m a genius, you know.”

Jonathan’s mouth went dry.

He so wanted to believe Edward wouldn’t, but damn it, the man had conquered Gotham and fed its people to animals. He couldn’t believe Edward wouldn’t do something as savage as making Jonathan’s head explode just for bothering him. Edward was kind of insane, you know.

Jonathan’s brow furrowed.

He couldn’t die here, for God’s sake. He’d barely started his criminal profession, he couldn’t just die in a bunker with nobody knowing. His tryst at his old university would be forgotten, just a distant tragedy someone would have to find through a thorough Google search of the establishment. There would no longer be a ‘Scarecrow’ in Gotham, and no one would know what happened to him.

Edward cocked his head, looking to the ceiling in thought as he pursed his lips, then shrugged. “I’m a fan of immediate gratification, I must admit, so…the latter sounds just about right.”

Jonathan felt sweat cling to his skin under his costume, wetting the spots under his arms and down his back as he watched Edward’s feet from the limited view his helmet provided. He watched them approach and wait for him to come around the track.

“Hang on, Riddler,” Jonathan said, voice wobbling, knowing he was just mere steps from death, “don’t. This isn’t necessary -”

“It’s very necessary.”

He could just about see Edward’s feet, still. They just stood there, waiting.

Jonathan tried to wrestle himself free of his handcuffs, but even his bony limbs couldn’t slip out, not without dislocating his wrists and adding some form of lubricant.

“It was one incident, Riddler, there’s no *need* to -”

“One incident too many, Dr. Crane.”

No, no, no, please, he couldn’t die here. Not by the Riddler’s hand.

“Fer God’s sake - yer base will -”

“I told you, I can replace it.”

He was walking up the square track’s edge now, toward where the Riddler stood.

“Riddler, please -”

“It was nice working with you, Dr. Crane.”

The tip of Edward’s cane came into view, hovering, waiting for the green light.

“Goodbye, doctor.”

“DON’T!”

Edward slammed his cane down upon the light’s projection.

The green light flashed red as beeping erupted from Jonathan’s helmet, getting quicker and quicker and quicker the more the light blinked and Jonathan had just enough time to turn his head away and shut his eyes and hope that death found him quickly and that perhaps Edward was wrong and that it would take him too so he and Jonathan could die together and the Riddler and the Scarecrow could just disappear from Gotham with no evidence to say why and how and and and -

…Nothing.

Jonathan’s statuesque state was broken when he could still hear blood pounding in his ears and feel his heart hitting against his ribcage. He peeled open one eye, looking down at the floor.

Edward’s cane remained upon the light, and the light still shone red, but nothing had happened. The device had even stopped pulling Jonathan around the track, allowing him to stand in place.

Jonathan stared in silence before his breath escaped him, and he panted out the terror that had gripped him right down to his bones.

Edward laughed. The fucker actually laughed.

“I’m sorry, doctor, I couldn’t resist.”

“What…What…?” Jonathan muttered.

A weight finally left his skull as Edward pulled the helmet from his head, bringing relief to Jonathan’s aching neck and allowing him to see more than just plastic netting, the floor and Edward’s shoes.

His head remained bowed, not wanting to strain his neck by straightening it too quickly, and he peered at Edward from under his eyelashes.

Edward had hooked his cane onto his arm, helmet in both hands as he smiled at Jonathan cheerfully. He hummed, then turned to take the helmet back to his desk.

“Don’t misunderstand me, doctor,” Edward said as he went, “I brought you here with the full intention of getting revenge on you. This entire idea was to get revenge on you; I don’t care what fear does to people trapped in a maze. That’s your area of interest, not mine, and the

maze isn't designed to be easy, so it wouldn't matter if they're scared or not. Though, anybody would be, trapped in there…"

The helmet down, Edward reached for the packet hidden behind the pot of pencils and waved it at Jonathan.

"This here is the explosive, doctor. I removed it while you were observing our subjects."

Jonathan continued to pant. "…Why…?"

Edward's expression stiffened, smile falling. "…You have something I've - admittedly - missed a great deal, doctor: you have passion. Your little speech spoke to me, is what I'm saying - where I'm from, passion like ours is hard to come by. Much as I hate what you did to me, much as I wish to teach you some respect…you have, frightfully, gained mine. And that's even rarer for me to come by."

He sighed. "Ergo, I have decided to spare you. You shouldn't take this lightly; this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Let this be a lesson to you, doctor, and think twice before you cross me again."

Jonathan didn't reply, just continued panting softly to himself.

It'd…been a trick. It'd been a trick. He'd been tricked. He wasn't dead, he wasn't dying, it'd been a trick. All just a silly trick…

And he'd let himself fall for it. He, an expert of human body language. He, who had ruled Arkham Asylum in place of Jeremiah, without the idiot even knowing. He, who was fear incarnate, ruled the very emotion, formed it in others and crafted it to his desired form - he had been tricked and he had been terrified.

Because of the Riddler.

An eye for an eye; a case of humiliation for another…

The Riddler had ripped fear from its master's hands and controlled it in his place - and what was the Scarecrow without fear in his grasp?

Just a pathetic, mentally-deranged man in a silly, homemade costume.

Nothing.

The Riddler had reduced him to nothing.

Jonathan felt his hands tremble, then he inhaled deeply through his nose.

Edward raised an eyebrow and cocked his head, smiling still, then he chuckled and stepped forward, leaving his cane at his desk and producing a small key from his pocket. On his way, he plucked Jonathan's sickle from his desk.

“Come, now, doctor, don’t cry. You’re not crying, are you? Please, don’t. You had my respect! Don’t throw it away now.”

Edward tucked the sickle under his arm, took the handcuffs in one hand and used his other to insert the tiny key into the lock, twisting it until it clicked and the cuffs opened. He tossed them down onto the floor, freeing his captive from them.

“You’re new to this, doctor, and we all make mistakes! Just let this be a lesson: if you want to be a Rogue in Gotham, you can’t afford to let your guard down agai -”

The tiny key dropped to the floor with an even tinier *plink* as it fell from Edward’s open hand, a natural instinct as his throat was grabbed in a tight hold that lifted him until only the toes of his shoes could comfortably rest on the floor.

The sickle was snatched from the air before it could join the key.

Edward let out a choked noise as he was grabbed, hands coming up to grasp the assailant’s arm for leverage so he wouldn’t hang from their grip. He felt fear and panic jab him in the heart as he looked to the face at the other end of the arm he grasped, to which Edward reacted with amusement, understanding as soon as he looked into the eyes peeking out from the mask.

“You!” Edward exclaimed through a laugh. *“You*…must be *Scarecrow!”*

“I *must be,* mustn’t I?” Scarecrow replied. His voice was gruffer than Jonathan’s, deeper just slightly, comparable to a sore throat, and his accent was much thicker, untainted by Jonathan’s attempt at changing it.

Edward stared into Scarecrow’s eyes; there was something in them that wasn’t in Jonathan’s, a darkness that couldn’t be human, that contained rage and a lack of fear. Where Jonathan’s eyes could be compared to wood, somehow - despite having the same pair of eyeballs - Scarecrow’s could only be compared to the deep soil of a ready-to-be-filled grave.

Nothing scared Scarecrow, he manipulated fear but didn’t seem to feel it, perhaps the one exception to Jonathan’s earlier statement; his range of emotions was incredibly limited compared to the primary personality, but that had been how Scarecrow was created: rage.

Rage that could rival those who carried red rings. Rage, and an urge for justice.

Rage, justice, and a little bloodshed.

(Alright - maybe more than a little.)

Edward’s laughter came to a crackling halt as Scarecrow squeezed ever-so-slightly harder, his eyes narrowing beneath the mask. This wasn’t to harm nor kill Edward, funnily enough, but to teach him his place; Scarecrow was not to be laughed at.

Scarecrow walked forward, forcing Edward to stumble as he instinctively tried to walk with him.

Edward's hands scrambled to keep his grip on Scarecrow's arm, staring with wide eyes at Scarecrow's face as he was forced backwards upon the console, back pressing upon all the levers and switches. One dug into the right side of his spine, but he dared not complain.

Scarecrow leant over Edward, bringing his face close to the Riddler's, who pushed himself backwards to try and keep Scarecrow out of his personal bubble. Edward's hat was crushed against the console and forced into an odd angle on his head.

"I don't take kindly ta *tricks, boy,"* Scarecrow hissed.

For once, Edward didn't know what to say in return. He just stared up at Scarecrow's eyes.

Edward had been incorrect in his little question earlier: there weren't two murderers trapped in this room together. There were three, and two of them really didn't like the other one. The thing about this murderer, however, was that he was completely devoid of any reasoning.

Edward had been convinced to spare Jonathan through their similarities; Scarecrow had no reason at all to spare anyone, least of all the one who had just tormented he who Scarecrow was so protective of.

Scarecrow's hand slid up from Edward's neck, fingertips digging into his cheeks instead, forcibly lifting Edward's head from the console and toward Scarecrow's own.

Edward - despite himself - tried to lean away from him, feeling his hat fall from his head at last. He was distantly aware that Scarecrow knew being in his personal space, touching him like that, was upsetting him - and that, of course, was exactly why he was doing it.

"An' I *don't,"* Scarecrow added, "take kindly ta *bullies."*

Edward swallowed thickly. His voice was slightly muffled from his lips' positioning. "Then…perhaps you need to consult with Dr. Crane. A-After all, he *is* the one who started this -"

"My child put you in yer *place, boy,"* Scarecrow snapped. His left hand began to rise, the curved blade of the sickle glinting in the light above them. "As I'm about ta do, *too…"*

Edward felt his throat go dry.

He weighed his options: he could try and fight against Scarecrow, but he'd seen how he moved earlier tonight. Scarecrow would be too quick for him, too acrobatic for Edward to just run away without the threat of being tackled to the ground and butchered. He doubted Scarecrow's abilities would even allow him to get off of the console or anywhere near the elevator; between Crane and Crow, Crane was evidently the brains and Crow was the brawn.

There was nothing he could do here, except beg for his life, as stupid and pointless as it was. If he was lucky, perhaps Jonathan would wake up and take his friend's place, and perhaps Jonathan would spare him, content with scaring him a little. Just as Edward had done to him.

An eye for an eye; a case of humiliation for another; a fright for a fright.

"Wait!" Edward exclaimed, one hand flying up in a calming motion. "Wait, wait! You - You can't kill me!"

Scarecrow stared at him, nothing changing in his expression.

Edward was aware he was listening only for his own amusement; he loved it when the prey begged for mercy that Scarecrow didn't own.

"You can't kill me." Edward lowered his hand. "If you do, Crane won't be able to carry out his experiment!"

He let a smile grace his lips.

Yes! *Yes!* That had been the entire reason for Jonathan's decision to work together: he valued his sciences, he wanted to see the fear in everybody's faces as they traversed Edward's maze, all the while choking on fear toxin.

If Scarecrow cared so much for Jonathan's happiness, then he couldn't possibly let this opportunity slip through their fingers! Imagine how upset Jonathan would be, to get this far and not collect any data! Scarecrow could never allow his dreams to be crushed like that!

Suck on *that,* Strawman!

"He won't be able to carry out his experiment, and that would be *devastating,* wouldn't it?" Edward went on, tilting his head and giving Scarecrow a burning side glance. "Yes. He would be without his data - this entire trek would mean *nothing!* Without me, he wouldn't know how to operate the panel; *I'm* the one who had this maze constructed, it's *mine!* Besides, who's to say this bunker would even let you leave, should I die? Perhaps the security system is better than you realise! Perhaps it's designed to - to *self-destruct* upon my death! Huh?! Can you say for certain this isn't the case?! *Huh?! Can you?!"*

He grinned in Scarecrow's face.

Scarecrow's eyes narrowed, then his left hand lowered, his back straightened, and Edward grinned wider.

Yes! YES! He'd *won!*

Scarecrow looked away from him, eyes searching the empty space as he thought about it, then he lifted his head again to fix his stare upon Edward.

"…My child would be…*without* his data, you say…?"

Edward's grin slowly fell.

He didn't like the tone Scarecrow was using nor did he like where Scarecrow's priorities laid because *that* gave away something else: he didn't believe him about the self-destructing bunker.

With a snap, Scarecrow's hand descended back down upon Edward's neck, closing around it in a vice-like grip that had Edward choking and grasping at Scarecrow's wrist.

The sickle was shoved under Scarecrow's arm to be held so that Scarecrow could push open one side of Edward's blazer, shoving his hand into the inner breast pocket, causing Edward to squirm beneath him, leaning his head to see what Scarecrow was doing.

From Edward's pocket, Scarecrow extracted the key for the console, which he immediately shoved into the slot and twisted it to turn the panel on.

The buttons and switches illuminated their bright purple under Edward's back.

Down in the maze, some of the trapdoors and sliding panels were snapping open and shut, causing their captives to flinch and watch. One of them began to cry.

Edward cast a worried look down at the panel the best he could with his neck in such a tight hold before he looked back up at Scarecrow.

From the creases under Scarecrow's wide eyes, Edward could tell he was grinning beneath the masks.

The Strawman took the sickle from beneath his arm, then leaned down to Edward's face and whispered in sickly sweet delight, "Are you…*distressed?"*

Edward swallowed thickly, feeling his confidence in the situation fade quickly, replaced by the realisation that whatever was to come next was going to be a lot more painful than Scarecrow's original plan.

"Wait," Edward said quietly as Scarecrow lifted him from the console, "wait - what're you doing?!"

Scarecrow ignored him, pinching under his jaw to keep his hold on him as he dragged Edward across the room, toward the corner where the entrance to the pipe was.

"Stop! *Stop!"*

Scarecrow slammed his foot against the button, opening the door to the pipe. He put his free hand to the top of the entrance and crouched to peer inside.

"Stop! *Don't!"*

Edward stumbled over his own feet as Scarecrow swung his arm around and shoved the Riddler down through the narrow opening, hitting his head on the edge and causing him to yelp and grunt in pain.

His back hit the plush interior of the pod; the small space forced his knees to his chest, causing him to accidentally hit himself in the chin as he scrambled forward to the pod's entrance.

"WAIT! WAIT!"

Scarecrow slammed the button to shut the pipe with the blunt end of the sickle, hard enough to break it. The button blinked and let out a tiny spark as it was broken into and the wire was exposed, but Scarecrow ignored that as he watched the pod shoot off down the pipe, the Riddler screaming inside of it.

The pod travelled quickly down the horizontal pipe, coming to a sharp stop to turn the corner, then zipped down until it had to stop to navigate another corner. Then it plummeted down the ninety-degree drop.

Between the stops to turn corners and the fall down to the end of the maze, Edward's guts were thrown about; surely by now, his stomach was greeting his brain.

When it reached the door at the end of the maze, the pod's doors opened and it suddenly tilted at an angle, throwing Edward out of it and onto the dirt.

Edward shrieked as he landed, then scrambled to his hands and knees to try and crawl back to the pod, but the door shut before he could even get a finger in and the pod shot back off to base.

Edward watched it go, then he spun around to scowl up at the control room, the silhouette in the long window tall and imposing as it stood over the panel operating the buttons and switches.

He ignored the people who stared at him with murder in their eyes, realising who the hell he was.

"YOU!" Edward screamed, jabbing a finger in Scarecrow's direction furiously.
"YOU'RE *CHEATING!* YOU'RE *CHEATING!!"*

Scarecrow ignored him, bending down to pluck his hat from the ground by its top. He sat it upon his head, sighing contently as he felt complete, then he stepped back to the control panel to peer out at the Riddler, who continued to scream at him.

"Child," Scarecrow whispered sweetly, like a parent, like a guardian, "sweet child o' mine, look. Awaken, an' see what Scarecrow has brought to you."

Scarecrow inhaled deeply through the nose, then their shared body lurched slightly as Jonathan came to acknowledge he was standing up straight, no longer at the carved track in the corner.

He blinked confusedly, then looked out at the view of the labyrinth. He saw the blob of green in the distance, jumping up and down angrily and shrieking insults at him, then he puffed out a small chuckle.

"Scarecrow?" Jonathan muttered through chortles. "Scarecrow, d'you do this?"

Mm-hmmmmm.

"Fer me?"

Always fer you.

Jonathan's chortles grew into laughter, which turned into a full-blown laughing fit that had him tilting his head back and hugging his belly. He laughed in amusement, in excitement, in gratefulness toward Scarecrow for merely existing, then he grinned savagely beneath his masks and used one finger to click the square-shaped button in the top right corner of the panel.

The skulls placed at the entrance of the maze all spewed fear gas together; between them, they created a cloud that covered the entirety of the free space in which the contenders stood.

There came a symphony of coughing and pleas for him to stop; Jonathan stared right at Edward as he coughed hard and dropped to his knees, then raised his head and stared wide-eyed and afraid at whatever he was hallucinating.

Jonathan reached for the knob that would turn up the volume of the audio feed from the maze; beneath the coughing, he made out Edward's words.

"I…I can't - I don't…I don't know what this is - I - I don't know what's happening to me, I… N-No, no, I-I know I'm smart, I swear I am! I-I've just forgotten, I…" Edward stumbled forward, pushing two people out of his way as he made it to one of the maze's first paths.

Jonathan pushed gently at a lever that brought a shutter sliding across Edward's way, painted with a riddle that Edward himself had concocted.

Edward squinted at it, then paled.

"I - what? Wolves…I - I don't know what that *is,* I…I don't know what this means!" He clawed at his scalp. "I - I'm a genius! I am! I promise! I - I just - I've just *forgotten* - I - I - I'M A GENIUS, DAMN IT!! I'm not like the rest of you!! I've just forgotten, I swear, I… What - What's a *riddle?!"*

Jonathan cackled in delight, clapping his hands once. He clicked the microphone to life.

"Is fear with you all?" He asked his lab rats. "Has it shook yer hand and made yer acquaintance?"

A chorus of screams and cries answered him.

"Good, good…Then I suggest you follow Mr. Nygma's example and try an' escape with yer lives. And remember," his held up a finger, "fear always follows, so you can run as fast as you can, but it will always keep up."

Another series of sobbing erupted amongst his rats, and Jonathan only cackled in response as he threw his arms out to the sides.

"Come, now! Don't cry, yer not alone in yer plight - fer yer *all* a part of *my experiment now!!"*

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